
BLOODWING ACADEMY
FATE TAKES WING.
WITH HEARTS OF FLAME
THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRIAR BOLEYN

ALSO BY BRIAR BOLEYN

BLOODWING ACADEMY

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BRIAR BOLEYN

WITH HEARTS OF FIAME



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Dedication

Can this really be the end?

For the readers who have flown on dragons and crossed worlds with me, screamed at cliffhangers, and loved Blake, Medra, Florence, and everyone at Bloodwing as fiercely as I do— this book is for you. Thank you.

And for my little sister. She is a Medra, a Florence, and a Visha all mixed into one and I would not be doing any of this without her love, support, and endless patience.

PS: Please try not to hit any fluffins when you launch your Kindle across the room.

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A NOTE ABOUT TRIGGER WARNINGS

Bloodwing Academy is a dark fantasy romance series with bully vibes. The series deals with topics that some readers may understandably find triggering.

A trigger and content warnings list may be found on the next page.

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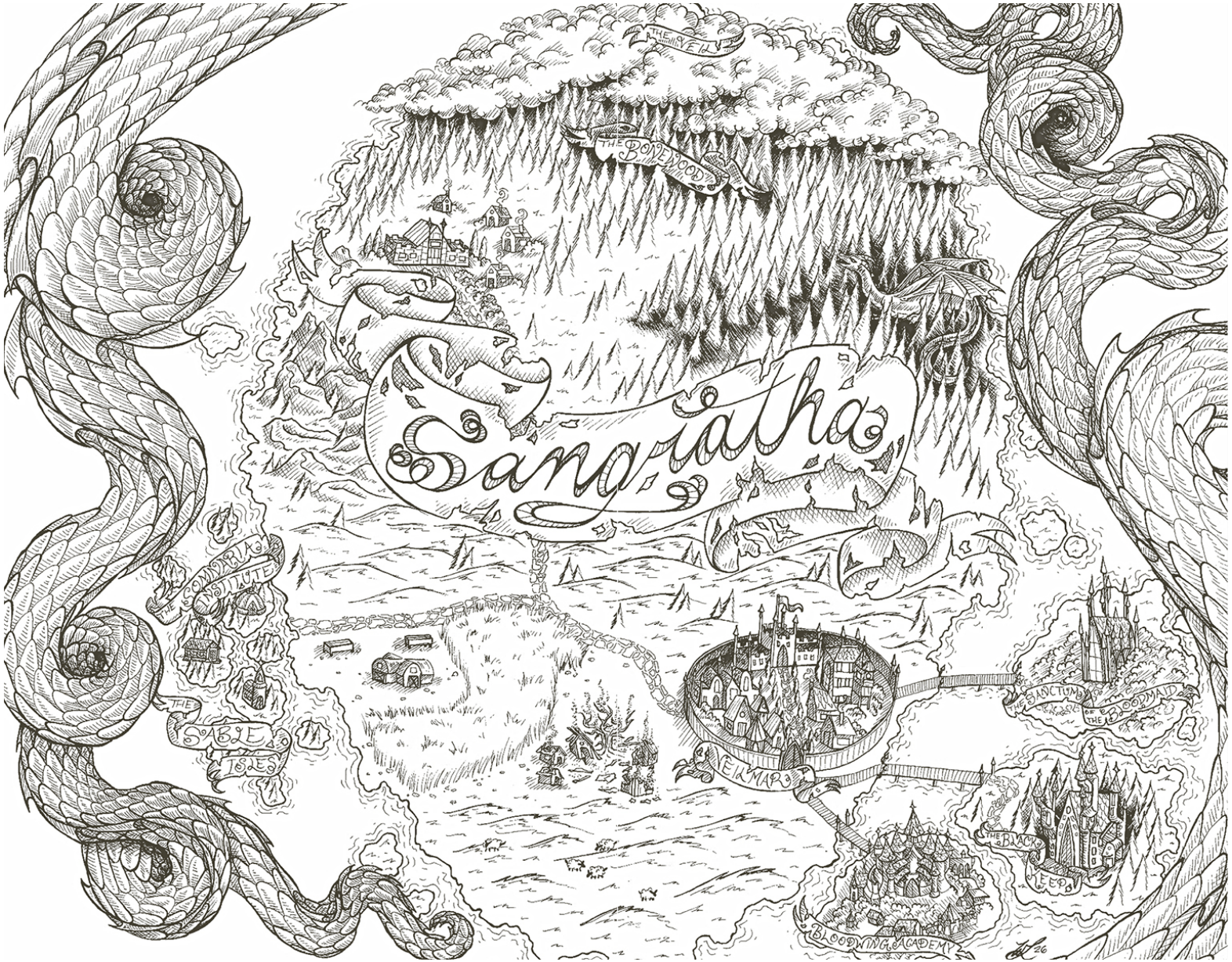
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TRIGGER WARNINGS

Abduction and kidnapping
Blood and gore
Blood play
Child abuse
Death and loss
Dubious consent
Emotional manipulation
Graphic violence
Harm to animals
Incest
Injury/threat to animals
Mental health issues
Murder
Nonconsensual mind control
Physical abuse
Power imbalances
Psychological abuse/bullying
Sexual assault
Strong sexual tension
Substance abuse
Suicidal ideation/threat of
Torture
Trauma

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THE VEIN
THE BONEWOOD
THE CONDERIAN INSTITUTE
THE SABLE ISLES
VEILMARE
THE SANCTUM OF THE BLOODMAID
THE BLACK KEEP
BLOODWING ACADEMY

PRELUDE



“Who meets their death devoid of love shall surely face their end.
But one who gives their soul away, eternity extends.”

— The Words of Orcades Le Fay, Queen of Camelot

For aught that ever I could read,
Could ever hear by tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth.
But, either it was different in blood—

Or else misgraffèd in respect of years—
Or else it stood upon the choice of friends—
Or, if there were a sympathy in choice,
War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,

Making it momentary as a sound,
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night,
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,

And ere a man hath power to say “Behold!”
The jaws of darkness do devour it up.
So quick bright things come to confusion.

— Lysander, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 1, Scene 1

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PROLOGUE



This wasn’t supposed to be how it went down. This wasn’t how it was supposed to end. Not for her.

For me? Sure, I’d always seen this coming. Had always known my story would finish with me bloody, ruined, undeserving of mercy. I’d be the blackhearted monster who was finally forced to pay his debt. Let’s not pretend we hadn’t seen it coming. The sins of the father are laid upon the son. And those sins stack up—they always do. But it was all right. Because I was ready for it. Ready to meet it head on and pay with my blood. No matter how much it took.

There were endless euphemisms for it. Paying the price. Making the ultimate sacrifice. Laying it all on the line. Answering the call.

Well, whatever the fuck you wanted to call it, I was ready. It was time for me to do what had to be done.

Me. Not her. She was never supposed to be the price we paid.

But then, I’d noticed something about this fucked-up world: you never really got what you wanted out of it, now did you? When had this world ever cared about fairness? About justice? When had it ever spared anything just because it was good?

So, yeah. I really should have known that from the start. We were always fucked.

Because Medra Pendragon? She was goodness personified, even when she didn’t want to believe she was.

The only good thing, the only real thing, the only pure thing in my life . . . was always her.

Ironic that she’d been a gift I hadn’t asked for and tried to reject.

She was the beating heart—not just for me, not just for this school, but for this entire, no-good, blooddamned world. She carried us all. She was strong for so long. She shouldn’t have had to be.

We weren’t enough for her. I wasn’t enough. I was a coward who believed that loving her—letting her love *me*—would some-how be enough to make things better. Now I was staring down the road ahead with nothing left to bargain with. And where she was supposed to be, there was just empty space.

If she was really gone, then there was nothing left in this world worth saving.

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Book 1
Springrise

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CHAPTER 1

LUNAYA



Even though it was the second month of Springrise, it was snowing again. Dark gray clouds blotted out the sun. It always seemed to be cloudy here—either it was snowing or it was raining, sometimes a combination of the two.

The manor house was unnaturally quiet as Lunaya crept down the hall. A long row of closed doors was on her right. Tall windows hung with heavy velvet curtains on her left. The air was damp with a hint of mildew. No one cared for this place now. No one would dust the ledges of the windows or see to the curtains when they needed washing. Perhaps once it had been a home, but now it was just a house, haunted and forlorn, a dead thing. Even if no one realized it yet.

Lunaya was one of the few who was permitted to be here—or, at least, someone no one would notice or care about. But she was not free, not in the slightest. Many were not. Most who had once lived here no longer lived at all. So, she was luckier than some. Unlucky compared to others.

She paused when she saw him—a boy, no more than ten or eleven, his pale blond highblood hair long at the neck and in need of a comb. He stood at the very end of the corridor, where he should not be, with his face pressed up against a crack in a door. His hair fell across his eyes as he leaned forward, too focused on spying to notice her approach.

Lunaya came closer, studying the set of his shoulders, the tension of his back. He was listening so hard it seemed to physically hurt him. He must know what the cost would be if he was caught. When she reached him, she closed her fingers gently around one of the boy's slender shoulders. He started violently, a gasp tearing from his throat, and Lunaya flinched. She

ought to have covered his mouth, but such rough ways did not come easily to her.

She put a finger to her lips instead, and the boy's eyes widened. They were a pale shade of purple. The color was unique to a few of the highblood houses. All could trace their lineages back to the Drakharrows.

"You shouldn't be here," Lunaya whispered.

The boy stubbornly lifted his chin. With a sigh, she moved to stand behind him. Not too close: She knew he was afraid of her. After a moment's hesitation, the boy turned his head back to the crack.

The room within had once been a drawing room, meant for comfort and decorated in excess. The trappings were burgundy and gold. A low table was still littered with overturned crystal goblets and spills of bloodwine that had never been wiped up. A fire smoldered low in the huge stone hearth, flanked by columns decorated with carvings of the Bloodmaiden and her priestesses carrying vases of flowers. Near the fireplace, a man sat bound to a chair—he was the lord of this manor. His fine clothes were torn and marred with blood. Lacerations crisscrossed his arms and blood flowed freely from a cut on his forehead. Across from him stood a young woman with pale white hair woven meticulously into a crown braid. She was beautiful in an unyielding way, her posture perfect, her expression aloof. She wore red leather gloves on hands that rested against the back of a nearby armchair as she watched the man.

Lunaya was too far away to tell if the gloves were coated with blood. She thought they probably were.

A few steps away, a hulking young highblood man rolled his shoulders back and glanced at the woman with an eager, bestial grin. Lunaya felt the boy tense beneath her hand.

In the chair, the lord of the manor gave a wet, hacking cough and lifted his head. He looked back and forth between the high-blood man and woman. "You won't get away with this."

The hulking young man's grin widened. "Isn't that what they all say, Catherine?" He shook his head. "Fuck, but it gets dull. Nothing else you'd like to add?"

"You know who I am. You know my family."

"'Course we do," the young man said, still sounding bored. "That's why we chose you, isn't it? The power of blood."

“And my servants?” The man’s voice broke. “Their children? What power did their blood serve?”

“Children’s blood is much more powerful than an adult’s.” The young woman called Catherine spoke for the first time.

“You attended the academy, didn’t you, Charles?” the young man teased cruelly. “Didn’t you study your sanguimancy? Your necromancy? Not much of a scholar, eh?”

“Lord O’Rourke is House Avari, Marcus,” the woman reminded him, smiling faintly. Lunaya knew Marcus’s childish sense of humor bored Catherine, though she shared his streak of cruelty. None of them would be there now if she didn’t. “He took … other classes.”

Marcus nodded. “Fine. Well, it’s their innocence, you see. Makes their blood more potent. At least, that’s Catherine’s theory. Blight-born children’s blood is good.” His mouth cracked wider. “High-blood children’s blood is better.”

“You have quite a flock of children here, do you not, Lord O’Rourke?” Catherine observed. “Quite a large number of your own offspring.”

“Ten children.” Marcus whistled. “Charles has been busy. Of course, he lost his poor Kiernan.”

Lord O’Rourke blanched at the name of his eldest son but stayed silent.

“Not to mention the many wards you keep,” Catherine went on. She stepped away from her chair and began to pace the edge of the room, her gloved fingers brushing over the furniture as she passed.

O’Rourke rallied at this, some color seeping back into his face as his expression turned angry. “I keep those wards for Lord Drak-harrow. They are his guests, not mine. I am an ardent supporter of your uncle. Surely you know this. Contact him. He will tell you. If he knew you were here—”

“He knows we’re here,” Marcus interrupted. “Surely you don’t think any of this would be done without the approval of the most powerful highblood in the realm.”

He glanced across at Catherine who smiled back reassuringly—as if to say *most powerful—for now*.

“That’s impossible,” Charles whispered. “He’d never …”

Marcus’s laugh was harsh and grating. “There are few things my uncle would *never*, I promise you that. Killing a few children? Slaughtering a few lords?” He shook his head. “No hard feelings, O’Rourke. It’s not a matter of loyalty. Simply … proximity.”

“Proximity to what?” Charles demanded hoarsely. “You’ve gutted my household for weeks. You’ve bled my lands dry. It will take years to recover from what you’ve done. What are you really looking for?”

Marcus’s grin widened.

Catherine tilted her head, studying the highblood. “You really don’t know? I’d assumed someone with your lineage would have been told.”

The lord licked his lips. “The Bonewood is close by, yes. The Veil stands at its edges—more visible now than ever. My family has watched over the woods for generations. But …”

Marcus gave a grating laugh. “He’s heard the name. But does he understand?”

“You’ve been picking off blightborn in the village for months,” the bleeding man said bitterly. “Of course I knew you were there.”

“But when it was blightborn, you didn’t give a shit, did you?” Marcus cackled. “You only care now that it’s you in the chair.”

“It doesn’t have to be me,” Lord O’Rourke said, his voice suddenly more controlled. “As you’ve said, children’s blood is more powerful.”

“You’d rather we kill one of your snotty little sons or daughters, would you?” Catherine looked interested. “How very macabre of you.”

“Not one of mine,” O’Rourke snapped. “One of the wards—there are many. Hostages from more than twenty houses. Surely their blood—”

“But only a few O’Rourkes among them. And only one the rightful lord and master of this manor,” Catherine pointed out.

O’Rourke’s breath hitched as the pull of the thrallweave took hold.

Catherine snapped her fingers. “Aha! There it is.” She looked at Marcus, and they smiled at one another.

“Just what do you think you have found?” O’Rourke asked weakly.

Catherine turned back to him. “Why, the doorway, of course. The one buried beneath this estate. The threshold your ancestors built over and then pretended did not exist.”

O’Rourke had gone deathly still. “That is not …” he said faintly.

“Not what?” Marcus finished brightly. “Common knowledge? No, it’s not.” He grinned. “You can thank your dear wife for spilling the secret.” Marcus raised his voice to a mocking falsetto. *“Just spare the children, I beg you! Spare the children.”* He grasped his own throat and made a gagging sound.

O’Rourke stared as understanding dawned. “You said you wouldn’t touch my family.”

“And we haven’t,” Catherine said brightly. “Until today. But all good things must come to an end.”

“She was the lady of this manor,” O’Rourke whispered. “You had no right …”

“I’d be more concerned with your own fate, if I were you,” Marcus suggested.

“There’s nothing beneath this house but old cellars,” O’Rourke whispered. But the color had drained from his face and not returned. “Storage vaults and the like.”

Catherine smiled faintly. “And a gate.” She leaned over a chair. “Stone carved with dwarven runes. Ringing a bell now?”

There was a long silence. O’Rourke swallowed. “The stone is decorative. Nothing more. The words … no one can read them.”

“Decorative?” Catherine shook her head. “No, simply sealed. And as for the words … Well, I’m quite a skilled linguist, and they are simply an older form of Classical Sangrathan.”

Marcus’s grin widened. “Very dramatic words. Very instructive words.”

Catherine spoke softly. “Do you know what the words translate to, Lord O’Rourke? Did your family pass that knowledge on to you?” The man in the chair made no sound. She smiled. “I see them there, in the recesses of your mind. They’re less poetic when translated. But roughly they translate to *Let the gate open only when the blood spills from those who hold this land. None but the rightful lord may pay this price*.”

O’Rourke licked his lips again. “My wife. Her blood …”

Catherine crowed, “How quickly the newly made widower recovers.” She shook her head. “Her blood was not enough. No, the stone calls for *your* blood. Your family blood.”

“My … second son,” O’Rourke choked out. “He has always been willful. Perhaps …”

“His blood will be offered soon enough, but no, O’Rourke, you great sniveling coward.” Marcus shook his head in what looked like a mix of admiration and disgust.

“You sit in this chair because the land answers to you—and the gate will not open for anyone else,” Catherine said quietly.

“But why?” O’Rourke’s voice rose to a higher pitch. “Why are you doing this? What is the point of it, any of it?”

“Come away, now,” Lunaya whispered urgently to the boy. “Come away.”

The blood would flow; there was no reason the boy should see it. He’d already seen too much. It was a sheer miracle that he had not yet been noticed and caught. She tugged at the boy’s hand. He ignored her, but she would not give up. When he finally stepped back from the door, Lunaya grasped the handle and pulled it shut very carefully.

“Come,” she said and started to walk back down the hall. “You need to be away from here when they come out.”

“Why do you care?” the boy challenged. “Why help me? You’re one of them. They’re your triad.” His face had wrinkled with disgust.

Her footsteps faltered. “Yes, they are.”

“Then, you’re just as bad as they are. You’re horrible. Lord O’Rourke was right. Why are you doing this?”

Lunaya stared back at him wearily. She knew the answer now, though she wished she didn’t. She had been young and far too naïve—just like the boy—not very long ago. “Why do people ever do horrible things?”

“Power,” the boy spat. “Wealth.”

Lunaya would have added a third and fourth option: And because they can. And to see what happens. “Highblood ways have always been cruel,” she said quietly.

“Killing other highbloods? Murdering children? That isn’t the highblood way.”

“It was. Once.”

“You’re just as bad as them. You think you’re not? You didn’t stop them when they killed servants’ children.” There were wet streaks on the boy’s face.

“No.” Wordlessly Lunaya stretched out her arms, showing him the marks.

He stared at her skin, at the fresh cuts, but also at the other disfigurations. The black web of necrotic veins that covered every inch of her body. “What are you?” he whispered, horror in his eyes.

“I don’t know, Persis,” she answered, her voice tired, so very tired. “Sometimes I don’t know anymore.”

The boy looked taken aback. “You know my name. Then you know my father. Lord Pansera will come for me.”

Lunaya forbore pointing out that no one knew they were here. All of the children had been transferred from other places. No one knew what was happening here at the O'Rourke manor, so conveniently close to the Bonewood. "I hope he will," she said gently.

A huge shadow suddenly passed across the tall window panes, and Persis stepped back quickly. "The dragon," he whispered.

"Molindra," Lunaya agreed.

"You have a dragon," the boy persisted. "So, why don't you leave?"

Lunaya's eyes were tired, briefly flashing with frustration. "Don't you think I would if I could?" Her face softened. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

For one so young, Persis knew to be suspicious. "Come where?"

"You're not the only one trapped here."

She led him down the corridor and then to a door that opened into another, smaller hall. Down the hall they walked, and Lunaya stopped before a tall door. She pointed to symbols that had been drawn on the door in red. "Blood wards," she said quietly.

Persis's eyes widened as he saw the symbols. Lunaya pressed her palm to the ward. The marks flared and glowed. The door's lock opened with a click. Inside the room, the only thing there was a cage.

"Oh!" Persis breathed as he saw what lay curled up inside.

The fluffin was a puff of cloud-soft golden fur. As they stepped into the room, the little creature lifted its head to look at them, overlarge ears flicking back at the sound. Its eyes were round and too large for such a small face. Too expressive and too knowing, as well.

"I've never seen one before," the boy whispered. He looked at Lunaya. "What's its name?"

"She doesn't have a name yet. What would you like to call her?"

The boy's face soured. "Why is she here?"

"You already know the answer to that. Because they want to use her for something terrible."

Persis swallowed, eyes going back to the cage. The fluffin had settled on her belly, paws stretched out in front of her primly. She stared at him with glowing, trusting eyes. "She's practically a baby. That's not fair," he whispered.

"No, it isn't," Lunaya agreed. She touched his sleeve. "But we won't let them."

In the cage, the little fluffin made a faint trilling sound. As if she understood the words the girl had spoken for exactly what they were: a promise.

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CHAPTER 2

MEDRA



Before this morning, if someone had asked me what I thought of Kage Tanaka, I wouldn't have known exactly what to say. I might have said he was infuriating, arrogant—just like another man I knew. I might have said he was always a little too cryptic. A little too sharp for his own good. And that half the time I couldn't figure out if he wanted to protect me or prove something by getting in my way. I would have said that he led House Avari with a wisdom that seemed to go beyond his years. That he was efficient and dangerous but knew when to stay his hand, when to be gentle, how to be fair.

I would have said I wasn't sure if I trusted him. But none of that would have been the whole truth.

The truth was there were no easy answers. Kage had never been the type to soften himself to make people comfortable. He'd challenged me—maybe simply because I'd needed it. And even what I'd viewed as a betrayal I knew to him had been an act of loyalty, even friendship. He'd never hesitated to act or risk his life protecting others. He'd fought for the city, for his people. Even for the people who didn't deserve him. I thought of his wolf. Of the way people were saying he'd raced toward Veilmar with Regan on his back. *Regan*, of all people.

Now here I sat by his bedside, in a hard-backed, uncomfortable wooden chair. The kind that always seemed to be plentiful in infirmaries. My hands were folded because I didn't know what to do with them. Outside the dawn had broken. Blake was gone. Florence hadn't returned. And in the bed beside me, Kage Tanaka was probably dying. Lysander had found him at the foot of Peace-bringer's Hill hours ago, his body broken, barely breathing. There'd been no sign of Regan or Viktor anywhere.

I snuck a glance at Lysander: The Orphos leader sat in a chair on the other side of the bed. He'd rolled up his sleeves and sat hunched forward, his hands clasped together. I'd never seen Lysander like this before. He'd always seemed so aloof, so composed. Even after his sister, Lunaya, had been taken, he'd walked around the school as calm as ever. Yet now he looked destroyed sitting beside the sick-bed of a man not even from his own house, his hands clenched so tightly his knuckles had gone white.

"Do you think the healers are right?" I asked him quietly.

Lysander didn't answer immediately. "Kage should be recovering," he said finally. "The healers don't know why he's not. His body's done it before—he's a highblood and he's strong—but it's as if his power …" He shook his head.

I frowned. "What?"

Lysander lifted his head and looked over at me. He'd always had an ethereal quality to him. His features were so beautiful, his cheekbones so finely cut, his eyes so brilliantly blue and perfectly shaped that, all together, they might have been described as *delicate*. His long, silver-white hair was pulled in a bun. Strands had fallen out and hung around his face, softening his masculine features even more. He wasn't a large man, though he was tall and long-legged.

I knew many people thought Orphos was the house of the weak. Those within its walls were considered odd and overly sensitive and were generally dismissed. In the grand scheme of things, Orphos had never seemed much of a contender in the battle for power in Sangratha. But I knew three things about Lysander. The first was that he'd stuck up for me at the Tribunal when no one else would; he'd said things that I had never expected from a highblood's mouth. The second was that he'd competed in the House Leadership ceremony the year before I'd arrived; Blake said he'd always underestimated Lysander before that day, too. But when it came down to it, Lysander had utterly destroyed the other challengers, and he'd done it quickly and with finesse. Blake said he had made killing look easy. The third was that House Orphos had been helping to fund an uprising—so claimed Viktor Drakharrow, anyway. There was a saying in Aercanum that I knew was the same in Sangratha: *The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*

So now, when I looked at Lysander, I didn't see someone weak. I saw a man who wanted to be underestimated so he could work in the shadows. I saw a man who considered himself my equal, even though he was a

highblood and I was not. Someone who shared my pain. Someone whose heart was breaking just like mine after the long, terrible night we'd come through. Someone who didn't have any easy answers for what might be coming next.

Lysander shook his head. "I don't know." He stood up suddenly, pushing back his chair. "I'm going to speak to the healers again."

The door closed softly. For a moment, I stayed where I was. Then I pulled my chair a little closer to the bed. Kage Tanaka filled almost all the available space on the small cot. Like Blake, he was a large, powerful man. But now, as I looked down at him, I feared Lysander was right and that Kage's power was being stripped away. He was so pale. His body was covered with so many bandages I could hardly make out the rise and fall of his chest. I'd heard that people blanched and heaved when Lysander had carried Kage in—just from the sight of those terrible wounds. I knew highbloods could heal, but it was hard to believe one could really come back from something like this.

Still, the look on Lysander's face had told me this wasn't about the wounds Kage had been dealt. Kage could be recovering. But something was holding him back—so what was it?

I leaned forward, resting my hands on the edge of the sheets gently, and lowered my voice. "Kage …" My throat tightened. The Avari wasn't my enemy, but he wasn't simply my friend either. We all needed him: He was a pillar holding up this broken world. "So, Blake is gone," I said carefully. "You probably figured that would happen. He's trapped with Vorago. He flew away." I gave a little laugh. "Don't ask me who *he* is, please. I have no fucking clue." I swallowed. "Florence isn't back yet. She and Nyxaris disappeared hours ago … And you probably already know we didn't find Regan. She was gone when Lysander found you. Viktor disappeared, too."

I tried to steady my voice. "Look, everything's gone to shit—I doubt that surprises you much. Lysander and I are here, though. But Lysander looks … well, you're scaring him, Kage. And that scares me." I took a deep breath. "Because you can't die. Do you hear me? All of us here need you. Too many things are falling apart already. You're one of the only people who can help keep this place together." My fingers curled into the fresh white sheet. "So I thought it was time I reminded you of something."

I waited a moment, as if half expecting him to respond. "You owe me a favor. Remember that? You promised me anything. You agreed you'd come

running, no matter when I called.” My voice broke a little. “Well, I want you to come running now. I’m calling the favor in. Are you ready? Here it is: I want you to live. I want you to heal. If you’re doing something to prevent that, if you’re trying not to … not to live, then I need you to fucking stop. Stop interfering—let yourself heal. Because you owe me, Avari. You fucking owe me, all right?”

I stood up abruptly as the door opened and Lysander came back in. He took up his position on the other side of the bed again in silence. “I’m heading out. I’m going to see if Florence is back.”

He nodded without looking up. I wondered what he’d talked to the healers about, but I guessed it didn’t really matter.

I walked to the door quickly, before the tears in my eyes could fall. Kage Tanaka *was* going to survive. He was going to survive because he had no other fucking choice.

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CHAPTER 3

FLORENCE



The world was on fire. I could taste the ash, smell the smoke, see the flames far off in the distance—and I didn't care. I couldn't comprehend anything outside of the small circle of field in which I stood. I couldn't see anything else but *him*.

I realized I was kneeling on flattened reams of grass. Neville had disappeared. My hands were still coated with emberfern sap. Shakily, I wiped them on the clean grass by my sides, never once taking my eyes off what was happening in front of me.

He rose up like a resurrected god. I'd never known a god before. But I was pretty sure this was as close as I was ever going to get. Earlier that same night, I'd learned a man could become a dragon. Somehow I'd never dreamed a dragon could become a man.

But here Nyxaris stood before me. On two legs. And very, very naked.

The realization was vaguely disorienting. Dimly, I felt my cheeks flush—not with embarrassment but with awareness. Of the sheer, unapologetic fact of him. His skin. His heat. His *wings*. They were still there, obsidian and vast, stretching wide enough to dwarf the ruined field around us. He was huge—tall, broad-shouldered. *Big* in every aspect from head to toe … not to put it in an overly vulgar or specific way. And yet, his wings were bigger, now unnaturally large compared to the narrow frame of his body. They should have been too heavy to be borne, but he held them easily, anchored to his back as if some law of nature had been rewritten just for him.

I belatedly realized his eyes were locked on mine. They were still amber, still glowing with a draconic fire. That much had not changed.

"Fireheart."

I flinched. His voice was the same … yet different. Deep but more mellow. I studied those eyes. I had always known them; they hadn't really changed. They had watched me from above, patient and unyielding. At turns gentle, at others terrifying. I tried to stand and failed, falling back trembling, my wrists weak from the effort.

Nyxaris moved at once, suddenly next to me. His hands closed around my waist, lifting me upright, steady and warm. Then they were gone. His face was uncertain. Silver-white hair hung loose and long around his face. Such a pale silver shade was the sign of an ancient highblood, but his skin was smooth and unlined.

Before I could stop myself, I'd lifted a hand and brushed a strand of his hair back, tucking it behind his ear. As I went to lower my hand, he grasped my wrist and looked down at it, as if as amazed by me as I was by him. Which was, of course, impossible. Because this man had been alive for hundreds of years. Yet in appearance, he looked no older than Professor Rodriguez.

I felt the blush on my cheeks deepen. Nyxaris was naked … but there was absolutely nothing vulnerable about him. I was the one who felt vulnerable. I'd never felt so small, so weak. So mortal.

"You're very tall," I said weakly. He smiled slightly, still grasping my wrist. I didn't pull it away.

He might not have been a dragon—not fully—but he still was large in a way that seemed to retune the space around him. I had to tilt my head up to meet his gaze, my neck slightly straining. And yet it seemed the way it should be. This man, this being, was an impossibility. I stared at his chest. His skin was warm and golden and covered with swirling curls of hair. Celestial-looking silver tattoos trailed over his upper body. Crescent-moon patterns were drawn on each of his upper arms. Symbols of House Avari. His body was built for power, his frame large yet still innately elegant, even graceful, despite the broad expanses of muscle and sinew. I looked up at his face: cheekbones anyone would kill for, an arrogant brow (but who would expect anything less?), his mouth beautiful and stern. But when he smiled …

He shifted slightly, and his wings moved with him. I sucked in a breath. I couldn't decide if he was more dragon or more man in this moment. Despite how familiar parts of him were to me, he was *different*. His eyes were molten and bright. I felt pinned in place, like a rabbit held under a fox's

gaze. I felt suddenly, acutely, painfully self-aware. Small, battered, smelling like blood and smoke and sap, the leather armor Visha had dressed me in now embarrassingly sticky with sweat, hot and heavy where it clung to me.

"How did this happen?" I whispered. "How?"

He shook his head slowly. "I … don't know."

I stared. "You didn't know that … that you could … do this?"

"I didn't do this," he said frankly. "You did."

"The fluffin did it," I corrected. "And now the little scamp has escaped, as usual." Nyxaris was still holding my wrist. I pulled it away, slowly, raising my hands to try to smooth down my hair, a futile effort at neatness.

"You look …"

"My hair is a rat's nest. I'm dirty, and I stink." I'd been trying to cultivate a laissez-faire attitude. *Play it cool, Florence.* But to my chagrin, I felt my face heat up even more.

Nyxaris's eyes had widened slightly. He sniffed the air. I blushed deeper. Then he shook his head. "Not how I'd have described it."

"What?" I asked dumbly.

"Your scent. It's magnificent." His eyes lowered, roaming my body, his nose still twitching slightly, as if he could smell … well, every part of me. Every. Single. Part. "As is all of you."

"That's very kind, but—"

"Kind, me? Kind, Fireheart?" He snorted. The sound pierced through me, filling me with joy. My Nyxaris was still in there. "You know I am nothing if not kind," he said sardonically then slowly shook his head. "We must get out of this field. For your sake, if nothing else."

"My sake?"

His jaw tightened. His cheeks flushed slightly.

"Nyxaris," I exclaimed. "Are you … blushing?"

"It's been … a very long time." His voice was tight. "And you smell … as I've already said."

"*Magnificent*," I breathed. "A strange assessment under the circumstances, I must say."

"To you, perhaps. To me, highly accurate."

He took a small step toward me. My hands lifted, pressing against his chest. I gasped, and he groaned. "What is it?" we both said together.

"This. You." I bit my lip.

"Gods, this is intolerable," he muttered crossly.

“Me?”

“This. Me. Us. I should get you to safety. We should return to the school. And yet, all I can think of is …”

“Is?”

“Is doing absolutely terrible things to you, Fireheart.”

“Terrible?” My heartbeat quickened. “What sort of *terrible things*?”

His gaze was predatory, hungry. I drank it in, still unable to believe it was meant for me. “Things beyond your imagining.”

I swallowed. “You might be … surprised by what I’ve imagined.”

He raised one charcoal brow. “Indeed?”

I said nothing. Nyxaris looked down at my hands. Still firmly planted on his bare skin. Then he raised his own and gently traced his fingertips over the tops. I shivered. “In the dark of night, in the quiet of sleep, in the solitude of your bed, what dark deeds have you dreamed of me, Florence?” he whispered. “When I sensed you, blossoming like a flower, filled with desire and spilling over with wet heat, who were you—”

“You,” I blurted. Immediately, shame spilled through my belly. “I’m sorry … I—”

“No more *sorry*s, Fireheart.” His voice was rough. And then his mouth was on mine, and it was rough, too, yet soft. Gentle and firm. Full of utter contradiction—just like my dragon. And full of fire. His tongue slipped into my mouth, and I made a throaty noise, halfway between a moan and a groan. Nyxaris’s hands slipped from my wrists, moving to my waist, then sliding down my hips, gripping lower, pulling my body hard against him as his mouth moved over mine like he was starving.

He *was* starving, I belatedly realized. I felt the tips of his fangs against my lips. I must have flinched, for the next instant, he’d pulled back, breaking off the kiss. He stood there, breathing hard.

I made the mistake of looking down—to see what I’d already … felt. He was hard. Big. Too, too big. My cheeks were on fire. “I’m so sorry,” I babbled.

His finger touched my lips. “Stop apologizing. Whatever are you sorry for?”

I gaped. Then lowered my eyes slightly. His gaze followed mine.

He burst out laughing. “This? Shall I cover myself? Hide modestly?” His face sobered. “Fuck that, Fireheart. Dragons are naturally shameless creatures. I shall not hide my desire. No, no matter how hard you blush and

tremble. I *want* you. I have wanted you for …" He stopped, breathing hard. "For what feels like a very long time now. And for the first time, I have the form, the means …" He looked around us, his face wry. "The fucking empty field." He met my eyes, his amber ones burning into mine. "If you permitted, I would strip you bare at once and lay you down amid the grass, then worship your body and give you such pleasure as you've never known in all your mortal life."

My heart might have stopped right then and there.

His face hardened. "But never, ever would I drink from you with reckless abandon or without your permission." He shook his head, and his silver hair swung. "I swear that to you. Do you believe me?"

I nodded mutely.

"Good." He began to turn. "Then, let us go."

"Go?" The word was a mouse's squeak.

He paused, looked back, then turned to fully face me again.

"Why, Fireheart," he began, then gave the most utterly wicked grin.

"What?" My voice came out embarrassingly high.

He raised a brow, still grinning diabolically. "Am I to take your interruption as an indication you see something you like?"

I cleared my throat, heart hammering. "I—I don't know what you could possibly mean."

He appraised me. "No?" And then the wicked creature lowered one hand to his cock. He wrapped the hand around it, and he … stroked.

I trembled. Watching as a bead of moisture formed on the very tip. I licked my lips.

"You should not have done that," Nyxaris murmured with amusement.

"What?"

"Why, licked your lips, of course. You have the most lovely tongue. May I imagine it?"

"Imagine it doing what?" I longed for a cold glass of water to pour all over myself and wake up from this impossible, dangerous dream.

Get a grip, Florence. Be a big girl. You just fought on a dragon. There's a city on fire back there. People died tonight. And yet you can't say the words?

I took a deep breath, then lowered myself to my knees. For the first time in our encounter that night, Nyxaris looked actually startled.

“Imagine what?” I challenged him, with more boldness than I felt. “Imagine this tongue …?”

He was standing so close. I could smell him, nearly taste him. The bead of moisture was so close to my lips. I opened my mouth, leaned forward, and wrapped my lips around the head of his cock, tongue sliding slowly over his sweetness.

He groaned, hands moving to tangle in the web of my hair. “What are you …?”

I couldn’t speak, even if I’d wished to. He was too large, too all-encompassing. Everything about him was overwhelming. The feel of him in my mouth. The taste of him, heady and tinged with salt. His body smelled of scales and smoke. I moved my mouth forward, taking more of him in, and gently urging him to … thrust.

He delved his cock deeper into my mouth, and I groaned. He froze.

I pulled back, gasping, every inch of my body flushed. “No, I didn’t mean—”

“This is unbearable, Fireheart.”

I stared up at him, confused. “I don’t understand. Isn’t this what you wanted?”

He stared down at me, then pushed his hair off his face with an expression of sheer frustration. “I want …”

He grasped me, pulling me up, then ran a finger down the leather jerkin that covered me. “Your mouth is exquisite, a gift from the gods. But I want this—all of you. These garments …” He gestured to my leather armor. “With your permission?”

“Yes.” I barely had time to get out the word before he’d lifted impossibly strong hands and rendered the leather like a knife cutting butter. The jerkin dropped, and my arms and hands leaped up, one arm crossing over my breasts and the other covering my lower parts. “Nyxaris!”

“You said *yes*,” he said lazily. The grin was back.

“I don’t recall you grinning this much as a dragon,” I said, a little crossly.

“You simply couldn’t tell—humans never can.” He looked down at me. “You are quite simply perfect.”

“Perfect? Don’t play games with me.”

“But games are fun, Florence. Even dragons enjoy them.” His fangs came into view as his mouth widened, and I did my best not to melt into a puddle of lust.

I took a deep breath. *Focus, Florence. Focus.* “How could you imagine this? You said—”

“Dragons have urges. Desires. Sometimes dark, impossible ones. I would imagine, yes. While knowing what I imagined—what I longed for with every scale—would never, ever be.”

“You truly didn’t know you could change form?”

“No.” His face wrinkled, as if in confusion. “I had memories that were wrong.”

I had to chuckle. “You mean, you never imagined that you’d be standing naked, as a man, in a field someday?”

“You’re rather naked yourself,” he pointed out. “Would you like me to change that?”

My heart stopped again, then restarted. “Change that?”

He slowly moved his wings back and forth. “I can provide some shelter if you like.”

I gave a mirthless laugh. “Oh, is that what you’d call it?”

“I can provide whatever you’d like, Florence,” he said, his voice seductive—whether intentionally or not, I didn’t know. But it was like liquid velvet, and it slid straight to the damp place between my thighs.

“I …” I tried to breathe but choked instead.

Nyxaris touched my cheek, amusement at the corners of his mouth. “Suffice to say this is new for us both?”

I nodded.

“Shall we cease talking and …?” Now it was his turn to trail off.

“Do unspeakable things to one another?” I was shocked I’d gotten the words out.

“I’m prepared if you are.” His voice was breathless. And then his mouth was on mine again. I never wanted it to leave. I could breathe around it. His tongue brushed mine, and my breath hitched, a wave of heat slipping over me. He stepped closer, and our bare skin touched. The contact was a shock to all my senses. Like being doused with ice-cold water. But better. So much better.

“Nyxaris,” I breathed around the kiss.

He didn’t respond. Simply made a deep, primal sound as he wrapped his hands around my waist, this time with no leather parting warm layers of skin, and pulled me flush against him, squeezing my bottom. I arched against him, closing my eyes as I felt his cock hard against my center. If this

was how good he felt just like this, then … I forced my attention back. His wings flapped lightly, then came forward, half closing, forming a circle around us, blotting out the field.

"Private enough for you?" he murmured, as his hands slipped over my hips, then lower.

"Y-yes," I managed to say.

"Excellent. Now, I cannot say I have a perfect recollection, but instinct tells me …" His mouth left mine, and I made a mewing sound of loss. His lips moved over the line of my throat, down my neck to my collarbone. My hands slid over his shoulders, feeling their strength as his head lowered below my shoulders and his mouth brushed one breast.

I started with shock, nipples turning to rock-hard pebbles instantly at the contact. "Oh."

"*Oh*, indeed," he murmured. "I must say, it is an absolute crime you were alone in your room all those nights." His lips drew one nipple into his mouth, and he sucked.

Goosebumps swept over my body. "Bloodmaiden," I gasped.

"Let's leave her out of this, shall we? I want to taste you everywhere. But I also don't want to leave any part of you for any length of time whatsoever."

"A quandary, to be sure," I breathed.

He stroked one hand over my other breast, his palm cupping it gently, then rubbed his thumb over the nipple. "Your breasts are divine," he whispered. "And yet …" He leaned back from me, looking my body up and down. "I do think we must …" He pushed me backward gently. I started to fall.

"Nyxaris!" I felt a wing catch me. I was scooped up, just above the ground.

"Now, there's a use for these things I haven't tried," he mused.

I doubted that greatly. Something told me that Nyxaris was once an adept lover. I felt a slight pang of jealousy as I imagined what he would soon remember about his former life—and those he had spent it with. How many women had he laid back against his wing? How many nipples had he licked? I didn't care. I didn't want to know, I decided. He was here with me now. This was happening *now*. I wouldn't dare turn coward.

His hands slid down my sides—as did his mouth. Leaving my breasts forlorn, his tongue slid along the curves of my stomach, tracing my navel

briefly, teasingly, before moving to my hip bones. I froze. This was a terrible idea. This wasn't me; I wasn't meant for this. I was too skinny. Too plain. Too inexperienced. Too … too Florence.

Nyxaris's head jerked up. "Stop."

"Stop what?" I said guiltily.

"You tensed. Whatever anxious thoughts you're thinking, I demand you stop thinking them this instant," he said sternly.

It was reassuring to know he wasn't in my head. Because if he was … well, that would be even more humiliating. Besides, that wasn't really how it worked. But I wasn't about to argue.

"How did you know I was?"

"Because, Fireheart, you repeatedly and consistently underestimate yourself. Well," he said fiercely, "do not underestimate this. My desire for you is a fire, and I will quench it. Do you understand?"

"I think—"

"No." His voice was sharper. "I don't think you do. But you will."

Then his mouth was back on me, and I was aflame. He licked between my legs—where no one had ever touched me before. The heat was sweet. The heat was bliss. One of his hands moved languidly up to my breast as I writhed on his wing. He lapped at the valley between my thighs—lathing his tongue over my clit as if it were his oasis in a barren desert. I was on fire, pleasure spiking through my veins, washing over me. There were no words for how good it felt. His tongue moved lower, and he thrust inside of me—stretching his tongue like a serpent, snaking deep into me, as his fingers replaced his tongue on my clit, stroking expertly. My hips rocked, thighs slipping open wider, shamelessly lifting to his mouth, desperate for him to slide deeper inside, to take me more fully.

His fingers were gentle, moving like feathers over my throbbing center. My body began to jerk. I cried out, pressing my hands against his wing to steady myself. Mounting pleasure exploded inside me. "Nyxaris!"

I broke into a thousand pieces, hot and cold all at once. Completely undone—and then completely whole. I slid down the wing, my body limp and listless, and he caught me in his arms, cradling me against him as the bliss began to subside.

"That was …" I felt drunk. Dizzy.

"That was merely the beginning," he said, with an arrogance only a dragon could possess. Gently he spun me around, then pulled me back

against him, his cock settling against my bottom. He pushed my hair out of his way, then settled his mouth against one side of my neck, suckling and biting gently, then cupping my breasts with his hands.

"What are you—?" I began to say.

"I will not feed from you, Fireheart. I have sworn it."

I knew that—I didn't doubt him. Yet, part of me wanted him to. What would it feel like if he sank his fangs into the soft skin of my neck? What sort of pleasure would it be?

"But you must be hungry," I said weakly. "You must need to feed."

"I long to taste you. All of you. But I am not so weak-willed as to lust for merely your blood. I wish to give you pleasure, not merely take."

"And you have," I said faintly.

"Not enough." One hand slipped down the front of my body and stroked my clit. I inhaled sharply.

"Have you ever been fucked, Florence?"

"What?" I gasped.

"Fucked." He nibbled my neck. "Properly fucked. Have any of those little boys back at your school ever truly satisfied you?"

My throat went dry. "I …"

"I didn't think so." He sounded satisfied.

I should tell him now, I thought. But I didn't, and I wasn't sure why. Shame, perhaps, for him to know how cowardly I'd been or—perhaps, worse—unwanted. I closed my eyes, tears pricking at the edges. I had to. It would be worse if I waited.

"I've never …"

He stilled. "Never?"

I managed to shake my head slightly.

His grip on me tightened. He swore, rapidly and emphatically and with impressive creativity.

"Are you … angry with me?" I gulped.

His hands were gentle as he caressed my breasts, my hips, my stomach, leaving a trail of gooseflesh in his wake. "With you? Never. With every fool who ever laid eyes upon you? Yes. Most definitely. But their loss is my gain."

"I'm a little nervous," I confessed.

"You have every right to be. But I promise to be gentle. Though, once we begin—" his voice grew thick "—I may be … greedier than I would like."

Heat spread over me, sweeping over my breasts, spilling wetness between my legs. He wanted me that much. He was greedy—for me. “That’s all right,” I whispered faintly.

His hands slid between my thighs, gently parting me. He entered me with one finger, and I arched back against him. “Please, Nyxaris.”

“Yes?”

“More,” I gasped.

He slid in a second finger, thrusting slowly. I moaned, leaning back against him. The feel of his cock, nudging against my leg while his fingers slid in and out of me was unbearable.

“I want you,” I said, making my voice firm. “Please. Now.”

He went still. Then very gently, he moved me slightly forward. I felt it then. His cock at my entrance. “Gods, you’re so wet for me, little Fireheart,” he murmured.

I was already soaked. Yet now I felt a new gush of moisture between my thighs and whimpered in shame.

“That’s it,” he encouraged. “So slick, so wet. You have no idea what a pleasure fucking you will be, sweet one.” His hands slipped over my breasts, fingers caressing my peaked nipples, as his cock teased my opening, entering me little by little.

I leaned back against him with a moan.

“That’s it.” His lips caressed my neck. “Surrender to me.” He suddenly moved. He pulled us down to the ground, tugging me on top of him, straddling him, settling me onto his thighs as his cock slipped fully inside me. He thrust his hips, and I cried out, writhing against him.

“Too much,” I moaned.

“You can take it, Fireheart,” he murmured against my ear, smoothing my hair away. “Do you want me to stop?”

I shook my head quickly.

“That’s it,” he whispered. “You’ve dreamed of this, remember? You’re a cerebral creature, my Florence. All those books. All those hours in the library. But nothing can quite prepare you for real life, can it? You’ve dreamed of this moment, longed for it.” He lifted his hips, thrusting into me. His hand reached for my clit, fingers stroking the throbbing bud, and I screamed. “Break for me, beautiful one. Break and blaze.”

His other hand gripped my hips as he thrust into me, and I turned my head, desperate, seeking. His lips met mine. The pace of his thrusts

quickened. He shuddered, groaned. “Gods, Florence …”

I sobbed, tears flowing down my cheeks. Not from pain—though there was a little—but from the bliss of this oneness, this moment I had never believed could be real. Not with him. Not like this. Perhaps my sleeping mind had known what my body had not. And then I couldn’t think about it at all. I was falling, gasping, lost in a dark, heated oblivion, and Nyxaris was following me in, his voice primal as he called out to me.

When it was over, his wings furled closer as his arms wrapped around me. Somewhere out there was the real world. With all of its violence and chaos, all of its unsolved problems. It would wait.

Nyxaris nuzzled his face against mine. “We saved a city.”

I snuggled against him, reveling in the feeling of our flesh touching. “I guess we did.”

“No *guess* about it. We did. You did.”

“I aimed a crossbow badly and missed many times. You did most of the work.”

“Don’t discount yourself,” he said sharply. “I won’t stand for it. You are my rider.” I flushed, and he made a sound of amusement. “Yes, in more ways than one.” He kissed my cheek with impeccable gentleness. “It was your first battle. And you were remarkable.”

“I want to stay like this forever,” I murmured. “Hidden away.”

“I’m afraid we can’t live in this farmer’s field forever,” he said, grinning as he brushed a hand over one of my breasts, and I gasped. “Though, I share your wish.”

“What happens now?” I eyed him curiously.

His eyes darkened. “I think … this must remain between us. For now.”

I stared at him. “You mean, you go back to being a dragon? Just a dragon?”

He frowned. “I believe I can return to that form again tonight, yes.”

I glanced up. “Not *night*. Morning.” A new day was dawning overhead.

“You are remarkable by starlight or sunlight,” Nyxaris said, touching a finger to my lips. “You are sheer perfection.”

I drew a shaky breath, trying to focus and deciding not to argue right now. I wasn’t perfect. What was more, some extremely harsh realities were slipping unwanted back into my mind, despite being wrapped in his wings and his arms. “Do you think Blake … survived?”

He studied me. “Let’s go and see, shall we?”

“I need to know …” There was a lump in my throat.

“What is it?” he said softly.

“I need to know that I’ll see you again.”

His grin was crooked this time. “We see each other nearly every day.”

“You know what I mean,” I whispered. “What if you turn back and—”

“I can hardly walk back to the castle with you like this, can I?” he teased. “You must remember I feel this way about you, regardless of my form.”

“As do I.” But what was the feeling? I was too afraid to ask. It was too new, too fresh.

“But to have others know … I must think it through first. Yes,” he said more firmly. “I believe I can change back. I believe I will be able to change back to this form again as well. Does that reassure you?”

“It will have to, I suppose.”

“We can always ask the fluffin for assistance. He seems to enjoy sticking his little wet nose in everyone’s business.”

I laughed. “You should give him more credit after tonight.”

“He is a furry, mischievous little scoundrel. What’s more, he sneaks treats from the kitchen.”

“I knew it!” I exclaimed. “He’s been getting heavier.”

Nyxaris brushed his lips against mine. “You’re adorable when you’re enraged.”

“I’m not enraged,” I said, my voice rising. Then I stopped. A terrible thought had just come over me. “We need to go back and soon, Nyxaris, but …”

“Yes?”

I lifted my hands to cover my face. “My clothes.”

“Ah, yes. I was wondering when you would think of that. Quite a dilemma.” Nyxaris sounded annoyingly cheerful.

I groaned. “It’s not funny.”

“In fact, it is hysterical,” he countered. “And if a dragon says something is funny, you may rest assured it is truly comical, for we have a superior sense of humor.”

“Yes, well, you’re in highblood form now, and you don’t need to rub it in,” I said grumpily.

His face fell just for an instant at the sound of the word I’d used to describe him, and I felt remorseful for pointing out what he was. What he’d secretly always been. Then, “There is a simple solution, of course.”

“We weave clothes from the tall grasses.” I was already eyeing them. “Yes, but it will take hours. And they’ll be scratchy. And I’ve never been good at sewing. But I suppose I’ll have to try.”

That or limp naked to some farmer’s hut and beg for a blanket. I could just imagine the exchange, especially with a dragon lurking behind me.

Nyxaris chuckled, the planes of his golden-skinned chest rising and falling. I watched admiringly, distracted for a brief moment. “That’s one idea, but mine is simpler. I transform back, and then I fly you to your tower room. Do you think you could manage sliding from my wing to the window?”

I grimaced. “I’ll have to, won’t I? Or die in the attempt, which would be extremely humiliating.” Nyxaris looked as if he were trying not to laugh. “Very well.” I groaned. “Let’s get this over with.”

As we flew, I saw Nyxaris had been wrong: We hadn’t saved the city. Veilmar was a wasteland. The sight of it hit me in a wave of guilt and shame. Were my friends out there somewhere? Were they even alive?

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CHAPTER 4

REGAN



Wet fur and blood. Red dragon scales.

My little brother's face as he gave a sidesplitting laugh. I reached for him. "Persis!"

He ran, laughing, across the snowy lawn. "You can't catch me! You're too slow!"

I was slow. The snow had formed high drifts. I plodded through, trying to chase him. I reached a gloved hand down into the snow, scooping up enough to form a ball.

I surfaced. There was sound before there was sensation.

"I need her alive. Do you understand me?"

My heart sank. A man's voice. I recognized it at once. Viktor.

"I understand you perfectly." A different male voice. Taut with strain. "But do you understand that, by rights, she should not be alive right now? Not based on what you told me. Nor after what you did to her."

My eyelids fluttered. I tried to force them open.

Light stabbed through—far too bright. I groaned, the sound too soft for anyone to notice. My head throbbed. My mouth tasted like iron and ash.

"I've done what I can for the wound on her throat. But she broke a Blood Vow." This was the other man's voice again. I assumed he must be a healer. "You told me she broke a vow."

"She did," Viktor snapped.

The other man took a deep breath. "Then, by rights, she should be dead. I don't know why she's not." I heard the confusion in the man's voice, mingled with fear, despite his effort at composure. "The Blood Vow kills. It does not merely injure or weaken."

“Yet here she lies.” Viktor’s voice was cold. “She lives, and you will keep her that way. She is of greater use to me now than ever.”

“Something is keeping her alive. But it is not my doing. I cannot promise —” The healer broke off as if he knew he’d made a mistake.

“You cannot promise?” Viktor’s voice, radiant with fury. “You *will* promise.”

“I promise to do all in my power,” the healer wheedled. “But you promised me. You promised me a cure. You promised me my wife and children would live, yet they remain caged. The plague—”

“Enough,” Viktor said coldly. “I will do what I can.”

I knew that tone. I’d learned it the hard way. I felt pity for the healer. I’d learned not to trust anything Viktor Drakharrow said. His words were poison, his voice a lie.

I thought back. I could remember when I’d broken the vow. I’d felt something deep within me compress and burst as I’d told Viktor that the wolf he saw before him was Kage Tanaka of House Avari. Poison had crept through me, choking my heart—just as I’d expected it to. It had been an ending absolute—and an ending that was meant to be my absolution. Yet here I was.

Pain stabbed through my heart. And Kage? Where was he? I thought of what Viktor had done to him, and the memory hurt more than any of my wounds.

“You said you had a way to cure this illness,” the healer pressed on, desperation in his voice. “You said you could turn them back. I have done everything you’ve asked. Everything.”

“And you live,” Viktor roared. “Be grateful.”

Poor bastard. The healer was clinging to a hope I knew must be false. His wife and children would die. Viktor had no cure for the plague. I knew what the healer must be feeling. I knew what it was to want to believe so badly. You cling to the hope that if you endured just a little longer, gave just a little more, your salvation might really arrive. But it never did.

Persis’s face again. His sweet violet eyes. His innocent, happy smile. He was out there somewhere. Just another coin in Viktor’s pocket, a hostage to my archon’s cruelty and caprice. Would I ever see him again? Or was my little brother already dead?

The light at the edges of my eyes dimmed. Blackness spilled over me again. I drew a shuddering breath.

“No,” the healer cried, sounding panicked. “Dammit, we’re losing her again.”

I heard Viktor cursing loudly. I tried to smile then, knowing I was taking away something he wanted. No, something he needed—which was even better.

Hands moved over my body. Voices rose. The world tilted.

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CHAPTER 5

KAGE



Bloodwing Academy

A few days later

I woke with a snarl, every cell in my body humming with instant alertness. The air was clean. *Clean*, not smoky. I surged upright, hissing with pain as bandages pulled tight across my chest and the wound there flared hot. “What did you do?” My voice was thick and ragged; we’d put that down to smoke inhalation. “Where is she?”

The chair across from my bed scraped softly as the man who’d been sitting there rose to his feet, unhurried despite my desperation. His hair was pale white, like the first frost, half-twisted back into a bun on the top of his head and half falling loose around his shoulders, softening the lines of his face. His eyes were clear and blue and penetrating. Tall and slender with long limbs, some took his slightness for fragility. But there was steel there. Quiet, contained strength rather than brute force. That was, after all, the Orphos way.

It was also the Avari way. And it was the way I’d learned to read Lysander early on, without anyone else noticing.

“Where. Is. She?”

“Regan Pansera?” The man’s tone was too casual.

“Yes.” My voice was tight. “You know who I mean. She left with me. You were there.”

“I was.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Lysander,” I growled. “Not now.”

He raised his hands. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Nor would I expect a thankyou.”

Belatedly I realized I was in the House Orphos infirmary, not Avari as I'd first thought. The hangings on the windows were a rich shade of purple trimmed with gold. The curtains were open. Sunlight streamed in. I gnashed my teeth. "It's been hours."

"Days, in fact," Lysander said lightly.

I flew out of the bed. I stood up, turned to look all about the room, ignoring how much it fucking hurt.

"You're being an idiot. Sit down. She isn't here." Lysander moved toward me slowly, like one might approach a wild animal. "Her body isn't either."

"Body?" I whirled to look at him.

"You're going to bleed out if you don't sit down. You're not invincible, despite what you may believe."

"No," I said shortly. "If I were, she'd be here."

"We found you on the field. There was no one else there."

"Regan *was* there. Viktor was, too. We fought him, she and I." I shook my head. "I thought … I thought I had him." I looked at Lysander. "Why won't that wretched, worthless highblood prick just die?"

"A question I'm sure you aren't the first to ask in Viktor's very long lifetime. Now tell me what happened." The words were mild, yet I heard the order there.

"I'm not in your blooddamned house, Lysander," I grumbled.

"Yet you'll do as I say, won't you?" The words were light, almost teasing.

There it was. The familiar old rhythm. The one we fell into whenever we were alone. The private language we'd developed, the one that had gotten us through years of pretending we were nothing more than acquaintances. No, worse—nothing more than rivals, and despised ones at that.

I snarled. "Regan is missing. She is hurt. She could be—"

"But she's not. You'd know. Even now, you feel her, don't you?"

Reluctantly, I nodded.

"Then, sit back down on the bed, Avari." He raised a hand and pushed gently against my chest until I did as he said. "And tell me everything." He looked down at me. "You owe me that, don't you? You were ripped open when we found you. You should be dead right now." His handsome face was paler than usual. "You would have died within minutes."

"I don't care. I only care about—"

“Regan.” His blue eyes clouded. “Yes. I know.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh, I think I do.”

The edge in his voice wasn’t jealousy. I knew him too well for that. He was better than that—certainly better than I’d have been in his position. No, it was fear. The same fear he must have felt when he found me, bleeding out in that field. I knew the feeling because I’d felt it before, too. We’d spent years living with that fear. The fear of someone finding out. The fear that had made us constantly careful. The fear of losing one another before we could ever tell the world who we really were to one another.

We stared at each other for a long moment. “I’m sorry,” I said at last. “I fucked up.”

“You did. In more ways than I think you realize.” His face softened. “But we’ll find her. I promise you that.”

“There’s no time to waste,” I burst out. “Viktor has her. He has her, and she’s hurt.”

“And he will hurt her much worse.” Lysander pronounced the words with brutal slowness. “You know this. I know this. Regan likely knows it better than anyone, doesn’t she?”

I gave a reluctant nod.

“So we’ve gotten that out of the way.” His gaze sharpened. “There’s something else we need to discuss.”

I stiffened. “What?”

“When I found you, you were badly wounded. But not just wounded.” He took a deep breath as if the words were hard to say. “You were being drained. As if the life was being siphoned out of you.”

I stared at him. “What are you saying?”

“You were giving something away,” he said flatly. “Your energy. Your very life-force.”

I shook my head. “That’s insane. I don’t know how I’d even do that …” I trailed off as remembered something.

“What?”

“Regan,” I said flatly. “She made a Blood Vow.”

“And she broke it?” His voice was dangerously low. “I take it the vow was concerning you.”

“She had to break it,” I snapped. “She was trying to save my life.” We stared at one another.

“Well, she seems to have accomplished that.” Lysander said softly. “But she should have died the moment she broke the vow. Why didn’t she?”

“Our blood …” I thought for a moment. “From the moment she made the vow and our blood mingled, I felt … well, I’ve never felt anything like it before.” Lysander’s face was unreadable. “If I saved her, I did so unconsciously,” I told him. “I wasn’t trying to.”

“All right,” he said at last. He reached out his hand and, just for an instant, brushed it against mine. The touch was grounding. It was also a reminder that we were completely alone—he’d never have touched me like that in public. Because heirs like us didn’t get to stake claims in one another, not when it would threaten Sangratha’s precarious balance. Not when it would potentially weaken us to the threat posed by Viktor Drakharrow even more.

“You believe me?” Lysander nodded briefly, and I breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. You’d have felt it, too. When she rode me—” Lysander’s eyes narrowed. “Yes. I allowed her to ride me into Veilmar,” I said bluntly. “It was right.”

He knew what that meant. I studied his face, watching him process what I’d said. Lysander could be difficult for other people to read; he didn’t let his emotions get the better of him like most people. He was more like me in that way—well, the usual me, when I wasn’t terrified and furious.

“You chose her,” he said carefully.

I forced a laugh. “Believe me, there wasn’t much of a choice. I swear to you.”

Lysander crouched on his haunches in front of where I sat and looked me right in the eye. “The fact remains. You felt … whatever this was. Yet you didn’t tell me. And it nearly killed you. I almost lost you.” Briefly, he allowed me to see the pain in his eyes. “Lunaya is gone,” he said, his voice low. “I’m holding myself together by force of habit alone. I cannot lose you, too.”

The words hit me hard. Reminding me of all the ways we’d already been tested. Of why we’d kept this—us—hidden for so long. Because together we were targets. An Avari heir binding himself to an Orphos heir wasn’t merely a scandal, it was a threat. When dynasties combined their power, wars began. And when that happened, our families would pay the price. If we told the truth too soon, we risked weakening both our houses and causing their collapse. If we waited until we each had enough power of our

own to stand on our own, we'd rise together in strength. Now, with Lysander as the head of Orphos, we were close. I could feel it.

I gripped the back of his neck with one hand, then leaned forward, ignoring the pain, and touched my forehead to his. "Death could never separate you and me. You know that. But I was wrong. Forgive me. I was trying to keep her alive. I wasn't thinking about myself. But you understand, don't you? Tell me you understand what she is to us, Lysander."

His hands lifted to grasp my shoulders. I felt the power running through them, feeding into me. I felt comfort, connection. He'd always been the one who could give me that.

"I believe you. I understand." His blue eyes were steady and cool again now, the pain quickly and ruthlessly removed. "I'm going to help you get her back. We know he wants her alive. It doesn't take a genius to know why. He'll keep her alive because he needs her. Have no doubt about that." He rose to his feet. "But for now, you need to stop thinking about this. You need to rest."

Rage surged uncontrollably through me. I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring the throb of pain in my chest—it was nothing compared to what Regan was probably feeling right now. "Rest? When that heartless bastard has her?"

"Steady, Avari," Lysander cautioned. "You think I've been doing nothing while you lay in that bed? I have scouts out looking for her. Viktor has not returned to the Keep. When you last saw him, he was an Inferni?" I nodded tightly. "As a dragon you know how great a swath of territory he can cover now. They could be anywhere in Sangratha."

"Then, we'll go anywhere." I was bleeding through my bandages. I hoped he wouldn't notice, but the sour look on his face told me he had.

"I said Viktor *could* be anywhere—but he won't be. He'll be close. He won't risk leaving the seat of his power. Not yet." He waited until I understood. "We stay at the school. We look for signs. We heal. All of us."

"The city …" Guilt washed over me as, for the first time, I thought of my family. "The Avari compound was rubble. My mother. My grandmother. Has there been any word?"

Lysander radiated empathy. "Neither have been found. But there's a chance they could still be alive."

Which meant they probably weren't.

“The city is in chaos. The school isn’t much better.” Lysander looked pointedly at my bandaged chest. “You want to save Regan? You want to destroy Viktor once and for all? Then, maybe you should lie back down and try not to die.” He tapped me on the chest hard for emphasis, and I winced. “Not. Invincible.”

“Fine.” I grabbed his hand. “But only if you lie with me. Just for a little while.”

His lips quirked in a half smile. “Thought you’d never ask.”

I touched his cheek. “Lysander, I feel—” My throat tightened.

“The place where she should be is empty. I know. I feel it, too.”

“I shouldn’t have kept it from you. That was dishonorable of me.” He and I had been consorts for years, but what we had wasn’t supposed to exist. He’d been my everything for so long. Yet when I’d made the vow with Regan, I hadn’t told him how it had made me feel. Instead, I’d gone so far as to let my grandmother betroth me to Florence Shen before I’d finally had to admit to myself the pull that was there. I’d planned to tell Lysander that very night, to see if he’d felt something, too. But then a dragon had descended on Veilmar, and everything had gone to hell.

He laughed. “Never thought I’d hear you say that.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“Even for an Avari, apparently.” His blue eyes sparkled. “We *will* get her back. We’ll make Viktor pay. But for now, let me help you heal. Regan will be with us soon. I swear to you.”

My heart sped up. “What do you mean? Are you saying you’ve seen it?”

Lysander was an Orphos, their house’s motto Blood of Dreamers. They didn’t advertise their abilities—and not everyone of their bloodline possessed the same level of skill. Most people outside of Orphos thought their house was weak—even strange—and that was exactly how Lysander and his family wanted it. Strange and weak meant underestimated, overlooked, ignored. You could accomplish a lot more when your enemies thought you weren’t worth watching.

“You asshole,” I exclaimed. “I should have known. What did you see? Tell me.”

He clasped my shoulders. “Calm down. You know it doesn’t work like that. Well, not always,” he amended.

I leaned in to him. “Tell me.” I brushed my lips against his.

He shuddered. “I saw her in our future. Yours and mine.”

“How long? How long have you known it would be her?”

Lysander didn’t answer right away. Instead he fit his mouth against mine with a quiet confidence that stole my breath away. His hands slid into my hair. The kiss deepened, our lips moving hungrily. I made a low sound before I could stop myself. He smelled so good. Familiar. Comforting. This was the kind of intimacy that could only come from years of unspoken trust.

My fingers moved instinctively to the front of his shirt, searching for the buttons. He was the ice to my wolf’s heat. The calm to my fire. He was clean fresh air and stoic resolve—and something … something that steadied me even as it pulled, sending my pulse skidding wildly out of control.

He broke the kiss, hand sliding to hold the back of my neck, his forehead resting against mine as he met my gaze. “You didn’t betray me.”

I felt a lump in my throat.

“You protected her. And us.”

Something hot and wet pricked at the corners of my eyes. “I fucking lost her, Lysander. I *lost* her.”

He met my eyes, his own calm. “We’ll find her. And we’ll be together. Once we have her back, we will never, ever let her go.”

It was all I could do to move my lips. “Never,” I whispered in agreement. The word felt heavy. Sacred.

His thumb traced the corner of my mouth slowly. “Now you’re bleeding through your bandages. If you keep standing, you will collapse on the floor.”

My Avari pride pricked at me. “Suppose I wouldn’t want that,” I grumbled.

“No,” he agreed. “Not that I’d mind. At least you’d probably be unconscious.”

“Unable to run. Bleeding. Prone. Just the way you like me,” I joked.

He licked his lips playfully and raised one eyebrow. Then he gave a gentle push to my chest with both his hands. “Lie down, Avari.”

I pretended to fall backward onto the bed. It creaked beneath my weight.

“Bloodmaiden,” I cursed, grimacing as the pain in my chest flared at the sudden movement. “That hurts.”

I moved to scoot back, and Lysander was already there, bracing me, helping me lean back onto the pillows. He shifted his body to lie on his side as he stretched out beside me.

“Poor little wolf,” he whispered teasingly.

I could feel his warmth. He braced one arm above his head, leaning on it, then rested the other lightly on the bare skin at my waist, just above the edge of my trousers—the gesture possessive.

“I owe you my life. Thank you for it.”

“I should have gone with you that night.” I heard the regret in his voice.

“No, it would have been too obvious. You did what you had to do.” I reassured him. “Like you always do. I don’t deserve you.”

His mouth found mine again. The kiss was slower this time. His lips lingered on mine, tongue sliding into my mouth, unraveling me. He raised his hand. His thumb gently traced the edge of my jaw, then slid down the line of my throat. Every touch was precise, careful—completely knowing.

“You don’t deserve me,” he murmured. “But you’ve got me. Always.”

His hand slipped down my chest, careful to avoid the bandages. His fingers teased at the small gap between my hips and my trousers, then brushed over the fabric, stroking me until I gasped.

“You trust me?”

My chest tightened. “With my life.”

“You trust her?”

The look in his eyes told me he already knew what I was going to say. Still, a slight hesitation, then I nodded. “I do.”

“And you trust *us*?”

I looked up at him. “This is it, Lysander.”

“Then, we’re her warriors, Avari. She needs us. So let me piece you back together. So we can fight for her. Side by side.”

He shifted, pulling me closer, his hand sliding to unfasten my trousers, his breath warm at my ear. The world narrowed until it was just us. Just him and me, as it had always been. Until now. Now we were three.

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CHAPTER 6

MEDRA



I was not okay. But I had to pretend to be. Even though I felt as if my body hadn't stopped shaking since I'd left Blake's room the night he flew off. I slouched lower in my chair, hoping no one would notice my trembling hands, and glanced at the girl in the chair to my left. The one person I might have expected to pick up on my heightened anxiety seemed to be off in a world of her own. Florence's hands were knotted together, and she stared down at them, clearly lost in her thoughts.

The sound of a door slamming made me jump. I glanced behind me to see Visha marching in. She yanked out the empty chair to my right and slammed her body into it with a remarkable lack of care for pain. That was Visha. I watched her shove her hands through her hair, pushing back the longer wisps of blond along the top.

"Everything all right?" I whispered. She nodded curtly.

"All right, I think that's the last of us. Shall we begin?" Professor Rodriguez stood at the head of the long boardroom table, shuffling a stack of papers impatiently.

I glanced curiously at Visha. Blake had told me there might be something between his Second and our ever-so-complicated blight-born professor. But the girl's face was unreadable. I knew if she wanted to talk to me, she would. Visha wasn't one to hold back. She'd murdered one of her former consorts a few nights ago: Lucian Aleron would never torment another blightborn again.

So maybe she was simply traumatized. I gave a small sigh. We were all in the same fucking club, then. I doubted poor Florence was faring any better after all she must have seen in Veilmar. I needed to give my friends a break. After all, they were probably doing the same with me.

I tried to focus on what Rodriguez was saying.

"… an update on the plague situation. Healer Elycia, if you will?"

The dark-skinned blightborn healer from Avari rose from her seat near the head of the table. "We've identified several consistent traits among the infected." She glanced down at the worn notebook she held. "The first point should be obvious. The infection is still limited to highbloods."

Professor Alastor Vane made a grumbling sound of protest. I eyed him curiously. I'd never had a class with the highblood instructor before. I knew he taught Drakharrow students blood magic. Vane was a tall, slim man with a receding hairline and thinning hair so pale it seemed white. The fact that he wore it all tied back in a long greasy-looking queue didn't help his appearance. Still, regardless of his grimy demeanor, I remembered Blake saying he was a brilliant scholar in his subject area.

"I know *some* won't wish to hear this," Elycia said, raising her voice a little and looked pointedly at Vane, "but it's simply a fact."

Vane snorted. "Is it, indeed?"

"If you'd like to come down to the makeshift morgue we've set up, Alastor—" Elycia said, sounding as if she was losing patience "—and inspect some of the infected bodies, you are more than welcome to do so at any time."

Vane harrumphed. "Might just have to. Someone impartial must verify your claims."

"Excellent." Elycia lifted her chin. "Second point. The infected appear to become primarily nocturnal. There have been a few anecdotal reports of morning attacks, but upon further investigation, these were all before daybreak."

"More reason for little children to be afraid of the dark," Professor Magda Stonefist muttered. The dwarven instructor folded her burly arms over her chest. "Wonderful."

"Fascinating the way this plague works." Professor Sankara leaned forward in his chair and pushed up the sleeves of the purple Orphos robes he wore. "Primarily nocturnal. Yet not ruled out completely you say, Elycia?"

"That's right. We must remain vigilant no matter the time of day. For now," Elycia conceded.

"However, the attacks have slowed down. Nearly stopped. Isn't that correct?" Professor Elowyn Wispwood looked around the room anxiously.

“At least, that’s what I thought I heard.” The Magical Foundations professor tucked a stray piece of silky pale blond hair behind one ear.

Elowyn was a rare thing: a halfborn professor. A hybrid child born to a blightborn mother and a highblood father. Rare, because halfborn children usually didn’t survive birth. They didn’t possess highblood powers—at least, not typically—nor did they require blood to survive. For the first time, I wondered how Professor Wisp-wood had come to be selected for her teaching position.

“That’s right, Elowyn.” Sankara gave her a reassuring smile. “The attacks have slowed down.”

“There hasn’t been an attack in over thirty-six hours now,” Rodriguez confirmed.

“Thank the Bloodmaiden,” Professor Wispwood murmured, leaning back in her seat.

I had my own theory as to why the plague had stopped. I doubted this reprieve would last for good. Not while Catherine and Marcus were still hammering on the Veil.

“But as Healer Elycia has said,” Rodriguez continued, “we remain on high alert. We’re in the midst of a pandemic the likes of which Sangratha has never seen before. This may have simply been the first wave. We cannot afford to let our guard down. We still have only the most basic grasp of how the plague even works.” He ran a hand through his dark hair. To my surprise, it looked pretty clean. The suit jacket and shirt he wore were stainfree and mostly unwrinkled, too.

The pandemic obviously agreed with Rodriguez. It looked like in the midst of handling all this chaos, he hadn’t found time to pick up a bottle.

“Now, on to the relief efforts in Veilmar,” he went on. “Sebastian, perhaps you’d like to give the update?”

Professor Sankara pushed back his chair and stood up. The high-blood combat instructor towered over his neighbors as his regal purple robes swung around his large but graceful frame. “Absolutely.” He looked around the room and smiled warmly. “Good afternoon, everyone. I’m glad to see you’re all here—and all mostly in one piece. It’s been a dark few days, but I think we’re starting to see the light now, aren’t we?”

There were some murmurs of assent and even a few returned smiles.

“Excellent. Now, as for relief efforts. Teams of students supervised by Bloodwing healers and professors have been rotating through the city to

assist with recovery. We've been providing medical aid, clearing debris, and helping to reunite survivors. We've also been setting up temporary shelters, many within temples and other community buildings, when these have been in good-enough condition for our purposes."

I studied Sankara's face. He was a highblood, but he'd always been fair to me. And over the last few days, he'd proven himself to be a truly decent man—not to mention excellent with a war hammer. But he'd also been willing to put Blake in chains. Just like two others in the room with me at that moment.

Before I'd gotten here, I'd told myself I wasn't going to hold it against them. They'd been scared. They'd wanted to fix things. They'd thought what they were doing might actually work.

But they'd been wrong.

Still, I had to forgive them. I had to move on. Because that was the past. The only thing that mattered now was what happened to Blake next.

"Of course, we are reaching the point," Rodriguez was saying quietly, "where recovery efforts will soon shift into rebuilding. Fewer survivors are being found with each passing day."

"Of course," Sankara murmured. "Very true."

The room went silent for a moment. I swallowed. No one asked how many bodies had been found so far. No one really wanted to know.

Did Blake know? Did he see their faces constantly in his sleep, even when awake? He'd said he'd killed children. I forced the thought away. Thinking those thoughts would only bring frustration—also tears. I didn't have time for any more godsdamned crying.

Rebuilding. The word rang in my head. As if the world were something you could just put back together so easily, brick by brick. As if loss were so simple to solve.

My fingers curled together. Blake was gone. It had been more than four days, and he was gone. He needed my blood to survive. So how much time did he have left? Surely Vorago wanted to live, which meant Blake was fighting an internal war right now—but not with himself. Vorago was *not* Blake; he was an invader who had infested Blake's body. One I would help Blake force out and destroy. As soon as I could fucking find him.

Rodriguez was saying something about maintaining supply lines from the towns to the cities, coordinating with the city council, and how Bloodwing had to maintain itself as a refuge for those in need. Nothing I disagreed

with. I glanced at Florence. She was looking at Rodriguez, but I couldn't tell if she was truly listening to anything he said. Maybe she was thinking about her mother. She hadn't asked me about Blake since that night. We'd both just been going through the motions of living. Both of us were too exhausted from helping with the recovery efforts to talk to one another, when we did run into each other in our shared room. Now I wondered, did she even care, or had she written Blake off? Was he just a monster in her mind now? In all their minds?

The door slammed shut behind me again, and I turned to see Lysander Orphos stride in. He made his way to an empty chair next to Theo Drakharrow and sat down. "Apologies for my tardiness. I was in the infirmary, checking on Kage Tanaka."

I perked up. "How is Kage?" I'd heard he'd turned a corner. Had he somehow heard my threat that day? Or would he have recovered anyway? It didn't matter. I'd consider that debt fulfilled.

Lysander looked across the table at me. "He's much improved. I know he wishes he could be here." He glanced around the table. "But his wounds, as you all know, were severe. For a while, we weren't sure he would pull through."

"Thanks to fucking Viktor Drakharrow," Evie spat. The gamine copper-skinned girl with gold rings in her ears and nose slouched in her silver Avari robes. Evie Marasigan was Kage's Second. I knew that she'd stepped up to lead House Avari in Kage's absence. Apparently, there'd been a bit of a spat between her and Lysander over where Kage's recovery should take place. She'd wanted Kage brought to the Avari infirmary, but Lysander had stubbornly insisted it was too dangerous to move him.

"Viktor Drakharrow remains missing," Rodriguez agreed. "And having initiated the attack on Veilmar—"

"Allegedly."

Everyone looked over at the speaker, who was, of course, Professor Vane. I sighed and rubbed my temples.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Visha exclaimed. "I'm a highblood, too. I'm also in Drakharrow. But that doesn't mean we all have to pretend Viktor Drakharrow wasn't responsible for what happened to Veilmar."

Vane looked annoyed, but he didn't respond.

"If we've gotten that out of the way, then yes, I think we can hopefully all agree that Viktor Drakharrow is indeed one of our greatest threats,"

Rodriguez said slowly.

Lysander laid his palms flat on the table. “Let’s not forget that Regan Pansera is also still missing.”

“Are we seriously supposed to care about Regan Pansera?” Evie’s expression was incredulous. “After all she’s done? I’m sure she’s with Viktor, and considering she’s his consort, I doubt she’s in any real danger.”

“That’s not the case.” There was a chill to Lysander’s voice. “Regan did not go with Viktor willingly, and she was severely injured when he took her.”

Evie frowned. “How would you know that?”

“I’ve spoken with Kage Tanaka about it,” he replied. “As you’ll recall, Regan was in his company when she left the school. He would like everyone to know that Headmistress Pansera—”

Evie snorted. “I think we can all agree that she’s the *former* headmistress at this point.”

Lysander nodded. “Very well. Kage Tanaka has expressed his desire for us to understand that Regan did not go with Viktor willingly. She was abducted.”

“By her own husband,” Evie pointed out, looking frustrated.

“That does not make the danger she is in any less real,” Rodriguez acknowledged. “I was never Miss Pansera’s biggest fan. But recently I saw changes in her. If she was in Kage’s company and he stood up to Viktor—”

“Regan stood up to Viktor herself,” Lysander interjected. “In fact, Kage claims she tried to kill Viktor and was badly injured in the attempt.”

The room filled with voices.

“Quiet, please, everyone,” Rodriguez shouted. When the room had calmed down, he went on. “All right, I think we’ve gotten rather off topic. I agree that we should try to find Viktor—and if Regan is with him, we should render her aid, of course. But we have a separate committee to deal with those matters. And in the meantime, there are other things on the agenda to discuss.”

Lysander got to his feet. “Fine. But before we resume the agenda, I’d like to make it perfectly clear to everyone here that retrieving Regan Pansera safely has just become one of House Orphos’s top priorities.” He looked down the long table at Evie. “It’s also House Avari’s.” Evie looked startled but nodded after a moment.

As Lysander returned to his seat, I could see Rodriguez trying to hide his surprise. “Very well. I’m sure we’ll all back you on that, Lysander. Perhaps we can discuss this more once we move into the Special Circumstances Committee portion of the meeting.”

Considering Rodriguez’s unnatural love of acronyms, I was surprised he hadn’t called it the “SCC.” But then, I supposed the thing he loved best after a good acronym was coming up with lengthy names for committees.

“Considering that House Orphos and House Avari provide more than two thirds of the funding for this institution, that is no more than I would expect,” Lysander said calmly. He met my eyes for the first time and I nodded.

Who would ever have thought I’d be interested in saving Regan Pansera and not in strangling her myself? But Rodriguez was right. I’d seen changes in Regan recently, too. I knew she’d come to Florence’s aid in helping Neville that night. I wasn’t sure how the woman who’d had the Crown of Bone put on my head in First Year had somehow become the woman who would rush to a fluffin’s aid. But ultimately, who was I to say who was worthy of redemption or not when I fully intended on saving and redeeming a man who had destroyed half a city?

Rodriguez had moved on to discussing the Community Service Club. My eyes wandered around the room as he talked. The space must have been decorated in Headmaster Kim’s time. It was full of dark, polished wood. Every surface gleamed faintly in the lamp-light, and all of the expensive furniture was hallmarked by a very specific kind of lurid highblood taste. The table and chairs were decorated with disturbing small carved figures of naked blightborn women, their limbs arched, spines curved, and mouths parted—in pain or in bliss, I couldn’t tell.

Rodriguez had turned to the new house alignments now. I wanted to listen, but a faint scraping sound tugged at my attention. I glanced to my right, past Visha, to where Theo Drakharrow sat. My eyes widened. Theo held a small metal file and was methodically chiseling off one of Kim’s horrid carvings. Tiny curls of wood fell to the floor from his chair as he worked to flatten out the lines of the vulgar decoration, his mouth curved down in a scowl. Tempted to laugh, I pressed my lips together. Then he looked up, and my sense of humor drained away. Theo’s eyes were bloodshot more than simple exhaustion could explain. Redrimmed and glassy, his expression was distant.

I made a mental note to talk to him later. Alone. That was when I also noticed where he wasn't sitting.

Vaughn Sabino—recently appointed one of the school's Blight-born Representatives and the head of the Community Service Club—sat across the table beside Evie. It was easy to see he was anxious. He stared at Rodriguez, his body rigid.

"The very idea of conscripting highblood students into such a club is utterly ridiculous," Professor Vane was complaining. "It is beneath them."

"Oh, you believe House Mortis should be exempt from doing good works, do you, Alastor?" Professor Magda Stonefist spat, her eyes flashing. "You're lucky any of them were permitted to remain in this school at all."

Vane bristled. "House Mortis may not be my own house, but it is one of the founding houses of Bloodwing Academy. Why, Mortis is one of the most prestigious bloodlines in Sangratha."

"And they're all blooddamned traitors," Magda decreed loudly. "Slaughtered teachers and students in the halls that night, they did. With no care for infected or uninfected. And then what did your new House Mortis leader do? Barricaded the doors against the refugees. Why, if it were up to me, Silvio Santos would already be strung up by his tiny testicles and hanging in the—"

Rodriguez was pulling at the collar of his shirt. "Yes, Magda," he said hastily. "Alastor knows all of this. And we have reprimanded Silvio. In fact, despite his being newly elected House Leader of Mortis, he's not party to this meeting, as you can see. Professor Briggs represents House Mortis this evening, and we thank her for volunteering."

A blightborn woman with long brown hair waved her hand cheerfully from down the table. "Good evening, all. I'm absolutely ashamed of House Mortis, the lot of them," she said brightly. "I'm with you, Magda. I think the entire tower of no-good bastards ought to be—"

"Yes, Elizabeth, thank you," Rodriguez interrupted. "But you *do* teach in that house and as we've discussed—"

"Oh, yes, Gabriel, I know the drill," Briggs agreed. "House Mortis history instructor, no more, no less. Not that I wish to teach any of those highblood devils history or any other subject after they held the doors shut on hundreds of innocent people."

"Well, I'm House Drakharrow and proud of it," Professor Vane interjected. "But never did I ever expect to see one of the noble four houses

shut out from this table or hear a blightborn—" he looked around the table but clearly thought better of it and continued "—a blightborn *woman* drag highblood names through the mud. You know, I'd like to know exactly on whose authority you're acting, Gabriel. Why, some might say this entire meeting is a sham. I don't see any actual board members here, after all."

Lysander Orphos cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact, there is one board member here, Alastor. I lead House Orphos both inside and outside of these walls, and I fully sanction this meeting. Moreover, Natsumi Avari is a member of the school board. She remains missing. But if she were here, I know she would fully approve. Furthermore, we already have Kage Tanaka's approval. As for Blake Drakharrow …" He looked at me, then away. "Now, Lord Mortis, who also served on the board, is dead—as you may recall. His daughter might have taken his place, but she is absent."

"And engaged in an act of treachery which threatens our very realm," Magda Stonefist muttered loudly.

"A strange affair, that," Vane said crankily. "Catherine ought to be here instead of that blightborn b—" Professor Rodriguez coughed loudly, and Vane glared at him "—woman," he finished sourly.

"Elizabeth is the name," Professor Briggs called across the table cheerfully. "And you've known me well over twenty years, may I remind you, Alastor." Vane harrumphed.

"Professor Vane does make a fair point," Rodriguez said slowly. "There is the matter of governance of the school. We should discuss it. As you're all aware, Bloodwing currently has no head. While we may not agree with him entirely, Alastor is correct that this is a rather unorthodox meeting. We have student ambassadors present, which is normally not the case for staff meetings or board meetings."

"But it makes sense under these unusual circumstances," Sankara pointed out.

"Absolutely," Rodriguez agreed. "But we do need to discuss the school's governance. The way I see it, we have several options. We might appoint a new head, put it to a vote. Or we could attempt to govern as a group by consensus."

There were loud groans at that idea.

"It would be challenging," Rodriguez conceded. "Not to mention quite time-consuming."

“Absolutely not,” Professor Stonefist declared. “I’ve better things to do with my time than sit here for hours arguing with Alastor Vane. There is a school to run and a city to aid.”

“I agree with Magda,” said Elizabeth Briggs. “We cannot have our time eaten up in petty squabbles over whether or not House Mortis students should or should not have to participate in mandatory community service to make up for some of their very poor judgment and, in some cases, absolutely inexcusable actions.”

“They are *highbloods*. No highblood action is inexcusable,” Professor Vane declared imperiously.

“Bloodmaiden.” Professor Briggs looked shocked. “Even after all we’ve just been through. Did Alastor truly just say that?”

Professor Stonefist had already rolled up her sleeves and tugged fiercely at her beard. “He bloody well did, Elizabeth. Oh, he bloody well did.”

“Magda, I am begging you,” Rodriguez moaned, “please sit down.” Only after the dwarven instructor had grudgingly resumed her seat did he turn to Professor Vane. “Alasator, yes, that certainly might have been the way of things in the past, but it is not the future of Bloodwing—nor of this realm, if most of the people in this room have anything to say about it.”

Vane harrumphed again. Magda continued to look murderous. Professor Briggs gave an awkward little chortle. And beside me, Florence Shen looked longingly out a window as if the boardroom were the last place she wanted to be.

“Missing being on Nyxaris’s back?” I whispered, nudging her gently.

She jumped higher than I expected her to. “I just need some fresh air. It’s stifling in here,” she whispered back. Her face was alarmingly red. I suddenly started to wonder if she was about to faint.

“I’ll open a window, shall I?” I stood up and moved past Rodriguez to pull open the tall glass pane behind him. As I turned back to face the room, I paused. “Look, a rotating headmaster sounds like chaos.”

“We could rotate the position among senior faculty,” Rodriguez suggested, looking relieved to be back on topic.

“Pass. Hard pass,” Professor Briggs said at once, while at the same time Professor Vane said, “I’d be more than happy to take a term.”

“Absolutely not,” Stonefist said heatedly. “I am not working in a school led by—”

“Just a moment,” I said, raising my voice. “I think we’re forgetting something important.”

Rodriguez turned to look at me. “What’s that?”

“Representatives from highblood families in Veilmar have been coming to Bloodwing demanding answers, demanding access. Expecting to retake control of this school and its administration,” I said.

“And no wonder,” Professor Vane said with disgust. “*Unorthodox* doesn’t begin to describe this travesty of a meeting.”

I ignored him. He was used to highbloods always being in control, always getting their own way. It was, as they would have described it, their *divine right*. But divine or not, that supremacy was a thing of the past. Vane didn’t understand that yet, but he would soon.

“I understand,” I continued, “that you’ve been … redirecting them, Rodriguez.”

His mouth twitched. “Yes, well, that’s one word for it.”

“I also understand that they’ve been leaving here infuriated. From what I’ve heard, you’ve managed to send them away while also making it clear that they’re no longer in charge here.”

“No one is,” Vane pointed out. “The entire school is in a state of mayhem.”

Professor Briggs rolled her eyes while Rodriguez rubbed his eyes. “I’ve merely postponed the inevitable,” Rodriguez explained. “At some point, we will have to meet with them. Once we’ve established who *we* should be, I mean. They are not accustomed to being told no.” He cleared his throat. “Especially not by a *no-account, ill-bred, blightborn professor*, as they’ve put it more than once.”

“And that,” I said carefully, “is precisely why I think you should be Bloodwing’s next headmaster.”

The room went very quiet. Rodriguez stared at me. Then he raised a dark brow. “You do?”

“Yes, I do,” I said evenly. “Although I have as much reason as anyone here to hold a grudge against you.” Not everyone in the room knew all of the reasons why that was, but it didn’t matter. Everyone was looking at us now. “No one—*no one*—pisses off the highblood establishment quite as much as you manage to, Rodriguez.”

A pause. Then a deep, rumbling laugh rolled out of Sankara. “She has a point. Gabriel has a unique skill set.”

“And he does it without coming to blows with them either,” Professor Stonefist pointed out. Her well-worn face twisted with wry amusement. “Which, Bloodmaiden knows, I wouldn’t be able to manage.”

Vane threw up his hands but didn’t say a word. He probably knew it was pointless.

Rodriguez gave me a look equally weary and amused. “That may be the least flattering endorsement I’ve ever received, Miss Pendragon.”

I smiled. “But it *is* an endorsement.”

The fact that Rodriguez didn’t turn the position down immediately told me he agreed—both with the sentiment and with the group’s agreement that he was best suited for the job of headmaster.

At least he hadn’t said no.

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CHAPTER 7

MEDRA



The first meeting was over, and the room cleared out. Rodriguez had sat down again. He looked tired but focused. The fire that always seemed to be burning in his dark eyes had not dimmed. Sankara was still there. So were Lysander, Visha, Evie, Healer Elycia, Florence, and Professor Stonefist. Theo was supposed to have been present, but he had disappeared. Vaughn was supposed to stay, too, but I'd watched him whisper something to Rodriguez and then slip out.

"All right." Rodriguez ran a hand over his face. "Let's bring this meeting of the Special Circumstances Committee to order."

Evie groaned. "Hereafter simply known as the SCC please."

"Yes, well, I wanted to call it the Special Ongoing Circumstances Committee," Rodriguez said, leaning forward eagerly. "In that case we'd have been able to refer to it simply as SOCC, which as you'll note is one syllable rather than three, but—"

"Rodriguez!" multiple voices shouted.

I stood up, the tension behind my temples deepening. "For fuck's sake, can we please talk about what really matters now?"

"Why, Miss Pendragon." Rodriguez leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. "Are you saying you didn't all stay back just to wish me congratulations?"

I snorted. "Look, there are some things I need to say." I glanced at Florence, wondering suddenly how much Nyxaris had told her, how much she already knew. I'd meant to tell her sooner. Just as I'd meant to tell Blake. What I was about to say would probably come as a revelation to her —to all of them. But that couldn't be helped now. We were out of time. Sangratha as a whole, and Blake most certainly.

I looked down at the tear-shaped drop of blood that had stained my wrist since my first day in Sangratha. Then I lifted my head. They were all expecting me to say his name. I could see Evie tensing, preparing to fight, bitter words on the tip of her tongue. “We need to talk about the Bonewood,” I said.

The room remained silent.

“We’ve been so worried about Veilmar,” I said quietly. “And so afraid Viktor might come back.”

“Among *other* dragons,” Evie said archly.

I nodded, an acknowledgment that she wasn’t wrong. Blake—Vorago—had slaughtered half a city. Fortunately, very few people knew that Blake was directly responsible. All most people knew was that a red dragon had struck Veilmar. Similarly, few knew Viktor Drakharrow had transformed into the second dragon some had seen fly over the city that night. And that was how we needed to keep it, Rodriguez had decided. At least for now.

All the people of Veilmar needed to know was that Nyxaris and Florence had flown out and stopped the bad red dragon—and that he wouldn’t be back. As far as the blightborn were concerned, Nyxaris was their new protector. And Florence? She was a true blight-born hero. They even had posters with her face plastered wherever you could find half a wall still standing.

“Look, I’ve been in contact with someone.” I took a deep breath. “Someone who’s with Marcus and Catherine at the Bonewood.” I caught Lysander’s eye and hastily added, “Not Lunaya.”

He nodded tersely. The room burst into chatter.

“What exactly are you saying, Miss Pendragon?” Rodriguez demanded. “Who the hell are you in contact with?”

“I’m saying I have some information about what might be happening there—and how it might be impacting us. I’m going to share it. Care to do the same?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he said coldly.

“Oh, please, Rodriguez,” I spat. “Come off it. We all know you’re full of secrets.”

“*Professor of Historical Secrets* should be the inscription on his office door,” Visha agreed with a fiendish expression. Rodriguez glared at her.

“When are you going to share what you know?” I demanded. “When there’s a plague going on? Oh, wait.”

“You claim you have information you haven’t shared with anyone,” he retorted. His eyes scanned the seat beside me. “Not even with Miss Shen, I take it?”

I took a deep breath. “No, not even with her. And yes, I’m going to share what I know. I hope that you, Rodriguez, will choose to do the same afterward.”

He crossed his arms over his chest.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. I’ve been in contact with … well, sort of with Molindra.”

“Molindra?” Florence squeaked. That had her attention. She swiveled in her seat to look at me. “Goodness, Medra! How is that possible?”

“Well,” I amended, “it’s not exactly Molindra.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” said the ever-tactful Visha. “Who the hell are you talking to if it’s *not* Molindra but it *is* Molindra?” Her eyes widened. “Is Medra possessed?”

“I’m not possessed,” I said hotly. “I’ve been speaking to … my mother.”

Silence. Dead silence.

“But isn’t she dead, Medra?” Florence’s eyes were wide. She was looking at me as if I might have actually lost it.

“All right,” Rodriguez said wearily, rubbing his eyes. “I see what’s happening here. We’ve all been through a lot of trauma the past few days. More than usual, I mean. Some of us may also see themselves as—” he coughed “—well, saviors, of a sort.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” I exploded. “Yes, I’ve been through trauma, but this is real. I’m not making this up. I haven’t lost my mind. And as for being the world’s savior, believe me, I have already been there and done that in my own world, and I don’t particularly need or want to do it again. Except, here we all are.”

Silence again.

“Your own world?” This came from Visha.

“Yes. I’m not from Sangratha.” I rubbed my temples. “I tried to tell you all that very first day when Blake found me. When he dragged me into the Black Keep.”

“I was there that day.” This was Sankara. He looked skeptical but interested. “You claimed you knew nothing about Sangratha. Then you said you couldn’t remember anything about what had happened to you or how you’d gotten here.”

“Yes, well, I lied, obviously. You’re fucking vampires. I was slightly intimidated. Look, I woke up a few hours before that, naked in a burned-down village. Blake found me, and he wouldn’t let me go.” That was how it had all begun. Well, I wouldn’t let him go now either.

“So you suffered from profound memory loss after your family was lost in this village?” Healer Elycia perked up. “And did you see a healer to discuss what had happened to you? Perhaps with the right treatments—”

“No, you still don’t understand.” I put my palms flat on the table, trying to stay calm. “I’m not explaining this well.” I lifted my hands and touched the tips of my ears. “You see these? My ears? My hair? The traits you think of as marking me as a dragon rider? That very first day I tried to tell you all, they don’t mark me as a rider where I come from. They mark me as being fae. I’m halffae.” I glanced at Florence. She’d ingested my blood in a dark-magic ritual Rodriguez had worked. Now she was developing fae traits, too. “In my world, there are many fae people, and they all have ears like this. And believe me, they are not dragon riders. There are no dragons in Aercanum.”

“Aercanum,” Rodriguez repeated. He was staring at me. “Is that what the place you’re from is called?”

“Yes,” I answered, relieved that he wasn’t trying to diagnose me with memory loss like Elycia. “I’m from the kingdom of Pendrath. But Aercanum is the name of our world, just like this one is called Sangratha. Aercanum is much larger than Sangratha.”

“How did this happen exactly?” Sankara demanded. “How does one simply travel from one world to another?”

“I still don’t know that exactly. If I did, I probably wouldn’t be here.” I shifted uncomfortably. “In my case … well, I died.”

“You died?” Florence squeaked.

I nodded. “I thought I had died, yes. I was fighting someone. Someone who was, well, a lot like Viktor. It’s a long story, and we don’t have time for me to tell it. But when I died, I wound up here.”

Elycia was opening her mouth, and that wasn’t good. I was sure she was going to diagnose me with insanity next, and really, who could blame her?

I held up my hand. “Wait, please wait. Look, I wasn’t alone when I woke up here. There was a voice in my head.”

Elycia pressed her lips together.

“I know how that sounds,” I said hastily. “I know how *insane* it sounds. Why do you think I never told anyone before now?” I looked at Florence beside me, staring up at me owlishly from behind dark-rimmed glasses. “Not even my dearest friend.” There was a lump in my throat. “I couldn’t risk it. Couldn’t risk that she wouldn’t believe me.”

“Did you tell Blake?” Rodriguez asked, his voice flat.

I shook my head. “Yes and no. I told him parts of my history, but not about the voice in my head. Not about how …” This was it. This was the hard part. I took a deep breath and shoved the words out. “Not about how my dead mother’s spirit had somehow saved me from dying, brought me to another realm, and then gotten stuck in my head. No, I didn’t tell him that part.” I rubbed my forehead and closed my eyes. “Just the part about being from another world and being fae,” I mumbled. “And he believed me.” It was too quiet. I looked around.

Healer Elycia glanced back and forth between everyone. “There is a *lot* going on here right now. I’m not sure I can take it all in.”

“Miss Pendragon’s story is completely ludicrous,” Rodriguez agreed. He paused. “But I believe her.”

I stared at him. “You do?” Then I laughed. “Of course you do. You probably already knew.”

He had the decency to look uncomfortable. “Of course I didn’t.”

“You knew parts,” I said bluntly. “You must have. There’s no other way.”

Professor Sankara looked back and forth between us confusedly. “No other way what?”

“He helped me, he told me things,” I exclaimed. “The kinds of books he has stashed away in his office?” I shook my head. “You already know he knows things about dragons no other person in this world seems to.” I eyed Rodriguez suspiciously. “So when I tell them about the Veil … ?”

Rodriguez said nothing.

“Right. You already knew about that, too, didn’t you? When were you going to tell them?”

“May we just pause for a moment? I do wish to hear about this Veil,” Lysander said coolly. “But Medra, can you please clarify for us to whom exactly have you been speaking?”

“And what is the Bonewood?” Evie exclaimed. “She just dropped that name as if we might know what it means.”

Rodriguez and I still stared at one another. “Rodriguez does know,” I said softly. “Don’t you, you lying bastard?”

“Watch your mouth, Miss Pendragon. And I think you should go first,” he said shortly. “Why don’t you finish telling us your little story?”

“Fine,” I spat. “My mother’s voice was in my head. I did a ritual to get it out. Her spirit was transferred to a dagger. I stabbed Molindra with the dagger, and well, you can all figure out the rest.”

Elycia’s mouth had fallen open.

“Are you saying you put your mother into a dragon?” Professor Stonefist asked, leaning forward, her eyes wide.

“Not on purpose, but yes. I mean, I think *she* actually did it on purpose. I wouldn’t put it past her,” I muttered.

“And now she communicates with you? Your dead mother in a resurrected dragon’s body?” Lysander asked, his expression one of academic curiosity.

“Something of Molindra is in there, too. But yes, she’s … necrotic.” That was how Orcades had put it.

“Can you speak with her right now?” Sankara asked excitedly. “Can you convey information?”

“Not right this instant, no,” I said awkwardly. “It just sort of … happens. Only sometimes. Usually when I’m asleep and dreaming.”

Lysander looked at me with more interest now. I recalled that House Orphos was very focused on dreams. I’d always assumed that meant interpreting them and trying to foretell the future—that kind of thing. We had people like that back in Aercanum, too, harmless fortune tellers.

“Look, let me get to the important part. Orcades—my mother—tried to warn me about the plague. But she didn’t know what exactly was going to happen or even that it would be a plague. She just knew something bad was coming our way.”

“How would she know that exactly? What has she seen?” Healer Elycia asked. Good. That meant she was starting to believe me. She wasn’t just sitting there analyzing my symptoms.

“She says she’s in a place called the Bonewood at the northern edge of Sangratha. Marcus and Catherine are there, too, and they’re trying to bring down something called the Veil.”

Rodriguez made a choking sound.

“What’s the Veil?” Visha asked curiously.

I narrowed my eyes at Rodriguez. “Are you going to tell them, or am I?”

He waved a hand. “You’re doing admirably,” he said weakly. “May as well proceed.”

I turned to Visha. “The Veil is like a wall between worlds. Apparently, most people had no idea it even existed, but Marcus, Viktor, and Catherine seem to have known it was there. They went hunting for it because they want to rip it down. That’s what they’ve been trying to do, what they’re still trying to do.”

“And the plague is a symptom of the Veil’s fracture?” Elycia asked. Good, she’d moved on to diagnosing the Veil now.

“Yes. At least, I think so. I’m sure Rodriguez has something to say about whether I’m right or not.”

Rodriguez took a deep breath.

“Gabriel?” Sankara asked. He was frowning. “Did you really know about all of this?”

“I knew … some of it,” Rodriguez admitted. “Not all. But yes, I believe Medra is right. The plague is a symptom of ill-advised attempts to destroy the barrier that separates our world from, well, other planes of existence.”

“So they’re succeeding,” Florence said quietly. “There wouldn’t have been a plague otherwise.”

“The plague is a symptom,” Rodriguez agreed. “A sign that the Veil is being weakened by their attempts. At least, that’s my theory.”

“That matches what Orcades said,” I added. “She said the Veil has a guardian. And basically, Marcus and Catherine are trying to destroy them.”

Rodriguez shot me a shrewd look that told me he might have a good idea of who this so-called guardian already was. But I didn’t care. I wasn’t about to tell this room full of devout Sangrathans that the Veil’s guardian was potentially their very own blessed Blood-maiden who lingered on in some strange ghost-form. I definitely wasn’t ready to tell Florence that.

“How are they doing it?” Evie’s face was baffled. “I don’t even understand how they woke up Molindra. Isn’t Molindra a House Orphos dragon?” She looked at Lysander. “I don’t understand. Lunaya wasn’t a dragon rider. Was she?”

“No,” Lysander said softly. “She is not.”

“Is?” Visha’s eyes were hawkish. “You think she’s still alive?”

“She is alive,” I said quickly, happy to put that to rest. I looked over at Lysander. “At least, she was the last time I spoke to my mother.”

Lysander didn’t look exactly shocked to hear this. He nodded.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Evie reminded us.

“Lunaya is an Orphos. Molindra was a dragon of House Orphos.” Rodriguez hesitated. “My theory is—”

“I’d like to hear it,” Lysander said.

“So would I,” I agreed. “Spit it out, Rodriguez.”

He glared at me. “Catherine Mortis revealed herself to be a powerful necromancer that night in the Dragon Court.” He gave a bitter laugh. “Marcus Drakharrow was never the most astute pupil. However, Alastor Vane tells me that Marcus was showing a renewed interest in blood magic just before he and Catherine disappeared.”

“Fucking Vane,” Visha muttered, kicking the table leg. “If he’d kept his stupid mouth shut we might not be in this position at all.”

“Vane seems to have unwittingly provided Marcus with some much-needed guidance,” Rodriguez agreed wearily. He looked over at me. “For instance, he told him about the necessity of rider blood.”

I stared at him. “My blood?”

He nodded. “They almost certainly had some of your blood that night. They used it in the ritual they performed. Combining a dragon rider’s blood with an ancient bloodline of dragon masters.”

“House Orphos blood,” Sankara said grimly.

“Yes.” Rodriguez looked across at Lysander as if reluctant to proceed.

“Please go on, Rodriguez,” Lysander said coolly. “Let’s hear the rest of this theory.”

“I believe Lunaya was not just forced into a triad. I believe she was forced into a lifebond with Molindra. The dragon is dead. Some of us saw her that night—I’m sure you understand what I refer to. The only way that Molindra was able to rise was because of Lunaya’s blood. The girl and the dragon are tied together symbiotically. I believe Lunaya is in essence powering the dragon for Marcus and Catherine.” He shook his head sadly. “That sort of a bond cannot be sustainable.”

“So it’s killing her,” Elycia said softly. She looked at Lysander with sympathy.

The House Orphos leader said nothing. Part of me wanted to ask him if he’d already known. But I didn’t dare.

“Where exactly is this Bonewood?” Sankara asked suddenly. “I’ve never heard of such a place.”

“You might have heard it in passing. It runs along the tip of Sangratha’s northern border.”

“Isn’t the O’Rourke estate up that way?” Sankara rubbed his chin. “I’ve never traveled that far north before.”

“Yes, well, we may have to now,” Rodriguez said grimly. He looked at me. “Is that what you propose?”

I stared at him. “What?”

“Obviously you thought we should know all of this. I assume you have some sort of a plan.”

I shook my head in exhaustion and disbelief. “Rodriguez, don’t be an asshole, all right? I mean, don’t be any more of one than you have to be. Do I look like I have a fucking plan, or any idea how to solve this?” I looked down at my hands. They were shaking again.

A smaller hand slid over one of mine, squeezing gently. I looked at Florence, and my chin wobbled. She smiled reassuringly, then turned her head to look over at Rodriguez. “Nyxaris said that he and the others paid a very high price to keep the Veil closed.”

“He did,” Rodriguez replied. “He paid with his life. His soul.” He met my eyes. “Until Miss Pendragon gave it back to him somehow.”

“And Molindra?” asked Florence quietly.

“She is a half thing. Neither dead nor alive.” He shrugged helplessly. “Does she have a soul? Who can say? But whatever she is, she cannot continue like this indefinitely.”

The implication was clear: *Nor can her unnatural rider—Lunaya.*

His eyes moved to Florence. “Nyxaris paid the price by choice. Perhaps he already told you this.” He looked around the table. “The four dragons in the Dragon Court—”

“Chose to be there,” said Professor Stonefist. She’d been so quiet that I’d nearly forgotten she was there.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“They were the first line of defense. Marcus and Catherine destroyed that. Then they went after the second line. The Veil Guardian.”

“That’s right,” Rodriguez said slowly. “How did you—”

“I am a dwarf, Professor,” she reminded him. “And I believe I may have been on this earth longer than anyone else in this room.”

That’s right, I suddenly remembered. She’d been known by another name. Once, she’d been a famous scout known as Grim-blade.

Remembering that made me think of Naveen. As a fellow dwarf, he'd been so excited to realize our instructor was a legend.

"The Emberwatch performed the ritual that turned the four dragons to stone," Rodriguez said.

"And you think there were no dwarves in the Emberwatch, Professor?" Magda scoffed.

He looked chagrined. "Well, I …"

"You hadn't been born," she said dismissively.

"Does that mean you were there, Professor?" Florence asked timidly.

Magda stared at her in silence for a moment. "It means this all goes back to the dwarves in many ways, Miss Shen. It means I have a great deal to think about and a number of letters to write. But for now—" Magda pushed back her chair "—we're all exhausted. As Miss Pendragon has said, she has no solution. Right now, none of us do. We've just had a great many bombshells dropped on our heads. We need to rest, and we need to contemplate our next moves."

It suddenly dawned on me that Magda Stonefist might be the most battle-hardened warrior in the room. I glanced at Lysander. He was studying the professor as if he'd just had precisely the same thought.

"Yes," Rodriguez said hastily. "Let's adjourn this Special Circumstances Committee meeting for now."

"SCC," Evie corrected. She groaned, stood up, and stretched. "Thank the fucking Bloodmaiden that's over." She met my eye and grinned. "And you probably thought his lectures were bad."

Beside me Visha snickered. "He is rather long-winded," she muttered.

"Yes, well, it's time-consuming to rebuild a world," Rodriguez said, a little crankily, clearly overhearing. "I hope you'll be willing to devote just a little more effort to such a worthy cause."

"And I hope you'll be able to share more of your secrets with us if they'll help in the rebuilding," I shot back, standing up and grabbing the satchel I'd hung on the back of the chair. I glanced over to where Theo had been sitting. The carved women had vanished from the arms of his chair, leaving rough spots on the wood. I thought it was a vast improvement. Maybe I'd have to borrow a file from him for the next meeting.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Miss Pendragon?" Rodriguez called as I moved toward the door.

I stopped, closed my eyes, opened them. "Oh, for fuck's sake."

I stomped back toward the table, passing Evie, then Visha, then Professor Stonefist. Magda shot me a sympathetic look and clapped me briefly on the shoulder.

Then she was gone, and the room was empty—save for Florence, Rodriguez, and me.

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CHAPTER 8

MEDRA



"Do we have a name for *this* committee?" Rodriguez asked as he sat back down and picked up a quill.

"Are you fucking serious, Rodriguez?" I exploded. "It's just a meeting."

"Let's call it the Save a Dragon committee," he deadpanned. "Or SAD for short."

"You asshole," I muttered, sinking back into my chair.

He shrugged. "Look, you're the one who wanted to talk to us."

"I never *want* to talk to you," I shot back. "I need information from you. That's quite different."

"You made me your headmaster. Evidently you have confidence in my abilities." Rodriguez looked smug.

"Yes, your ability to piss people off," I retorted. I shook my head. "Gods, I knew that was going to come back to bite me in the ass. I just didn't realize it was going to be so soon."

"Please," Florence begged. "Can we try to get on topic? It's been a very long—" she looked at the clock on the wall "—four and a half hours."

It was nearly ten o'clock. No wonder we were all so cranky. At least, Rodriguez and I certainly were. Florence just looked tired.

I eyed her guiltily. "I'm sorry, Florence."

She nodded. "It's all right. I kind of figured this was about Blake." She looked awkward. "I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to talk much about him before this."

"We've all been busy," I said and meant it. "I'm just glad you're willing to talk about Blake."

She nodded. "Of course. Nyxaris and I know he didn't want to do what he did. Vorago made him."

I stared at her. “Nyxaris knows that? For a fact?”

She nodded again. “Of course. Blake and Vorago are bound now. Vorago is clearly controlling him.”

“But there must be a way to save him. There has to be. Blake is still in there. It’s his body, not Vorago’s,” I said adamantly.

“I hope you’re right. We’ll help you in any way we can, Medra,” she said.

I felt a rush of tears to my eyes. “Thank you, Florence.” I turned to look at Rodriguez—which helped the tears dissipate immediately. “And you?”

“What about me?” He nibbled on the tip of his quill. “Do you even need me here?”

“Nice try. You’re staying, Headmaster.”

He sighed. “Fine. Shall we recap? Blake did a ritual—”

“He did a ritual with *your* fucking book,” I said furiously. “I found *The Dark Art of Eternal Bonds* in his room. Care to explain?”

Rodriguez tried to look innocent and failed. “He might have stolen it just like you once did, Miss Pendragon.”

“Did he steal it? Tell me the truth.”

His eyes narrowed. “Did you ever stop to think that I may have been trying to *save* your little boyfriend?”

“Rodriguez, whatever you told Blake to do resulted in him massacring half a city,” I cried.

His face fell. He sank down into the chair behind him word-lessly. The room was silent for a few moments.

“He was going to die,” Rodriguez said finally. “I really didn’t think …” He put his head in his hands. “Fuck,” I heard him mumble. He lifted his head. “There was already a dragon in him, Medra. He was already like Viktor. Not like Viktor exactly,” he added hastily, seeing my expression. “But he can do what Viktor can do. He could do it before he even did the ritual with Vorago.” He looked at Florence. “You probably know all of this already. But for Medra’s benefit …” He met my eyes. “You may not know that there are two kinds of dragons.”

“Oh, I don’t think I know all of this either, Professor,” Florence said quickly. Her cheeks had turned pink with excitement. I knew she was always eager to learn something new.

“Well, dragon breeding is simple.” Rodriguez’s mouth turned up. “In fact, I tried to explain it to Blake once. If a dragon has a dragon mate and

the two breed, then a dragon offspring comes from the union—obviously."

"Obviously," I repeated. As if anything to do with dragons was obvious.

"Those dragons are purebloods," Rodriguez said. "They aren't like Blake."

"What is Blake, exactly? How is he different?" I demanded.

"Well, some dragons are born, and some are made." He scratched his chin. "Though, a better word might be *triggered*."

I wrinkled my brow. "Triggered?"

He nodded. "That's right. Think of it as a latent ability that some highbloods have. The ability isn't always activated. In Blake's case, it was."

"And what activated it?" I demanded. Then I realized. "Oh."

"Yes. *Oh*. I'm sure Viktor Drakharrow knew exactly what might happen when he instructed his nephew to take you as his second consort."

"My blood."

Rodriguez nodded. "At least, that's my theory."

"What about the dragons who can … change? Like Blake. How do they breed?" Florence asked suddenly. "How did we get high-bloods who could do this in the first place?"

"If a dragon can transform—shift like Blake can—then they can only reproduce while in their highblood form. At least, that's my understanding." Rodriguez looked thoughtful. "You have to understand, there haven't been dragons like this to study in a very long time. And dragons like Viktor and Blake would have been a closely guarded highblood secret. I'm not even sure any existed outside the Drakharrow bloodline." He grinned suddenly. "As for the very first one? Well, I should think the answer to how that happened would be fairly obvious."

Florence looked scandalized. But I wasn't interested in talking about dragon breeding anymore.

"Blake will die without my blood," I pointed out. "He's still essentially a highblood, right? He can't stay in dragon form forever?"

Rodriguez shook his head. "I don't think so. Yes, I believe that you're right. At some point, he will need to return to feed from you."

"And if he doesn't he'll die," I said flatly. "And we have no idea where he is."

"That seems to sum it up," said Rodriguez, looking somewhat sympathetic.

“And you idiots frightened him away just when I’d convinced him not to …” I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’m going to find him. I’m going to undo this. I’m going to fucking kill Vorago. And Blake—” I choked “—Blake is going to be fine. He’ll make amends for what he’s done. Whatever he’s done, there’s still good inside him.”

“Well, that would certainly be the optimal outcome,” Rodriguez agreed softly.

“If Blake is getting weaker without you, then Vorago must be, too,” Florence pointed out. “There’s an upside to every downside.”

I shot her a look of disbelief. “Only you would ever say something like that.”

She smiled slightly. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. That’s why I love you.” I reached for her hand and squeezed it.

Rodriguez studied me. “Are you sure you can’t reach Blake somehow?”

“No,” I said, giving him a strange look. “How would I?”

“Medra,” Florence said gently, “aren’t you forgetting?”

I stared at her. “The bond. Like with Nyxaris.” She nodded. “But if I’m Blake’s true rider, why didn’t the bond activate? I can’t sense him. I can’t hear him.” The lump in my throat was back.

“Maybe he’s shutting you out,” Rodriguez suggested. “Or maybe he doesn’t know how to speak to you.”

“Or maybe Vorago’s not letting him,” Florence pointed out. She turned to me. “Nyxaris has told me a little about Vorago. He’s not like the other three dragons. He didn’t volunteer to be in the Dragon Court, he was conscripted.” She looked awkward. “It sounds as if they’d all done some things they regretted. Nyxaris wanted to sacrifice himself, so did Molindra and Alabryss. But they forced Vorago to join them. He didn’t want to. And now …”

“Now?” I echoed.

She paled a little. “Now Vorago wants revenge on Nyxaris. Probably on all three of the others.”

“Well, one is still stone, so I think Alabryss is safe. But Nyxaris …” I looked at her thoughtfully. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

She nodded slowly. “I’ll speak to Nyxaris. But I think so.”

Rodriguez’s face grew concerned. “We need your dragon, Florence. If this involves putting Nyxaris in any danger—”

“Then, it’s not really your concern, Professor,” she said sweetly. “My dragon makes his own decisions. I don’t control him.”

Rodriguez flushed. “Right.”

“And if he wants to help Medra save Blake, then I’m not going to stand in his way. I’ll fly on his back and be right there with him.” She met my eyes.

Rodriguez groaned. “Understood.”

“Well, everyone, I think this meeting is now, finally, adjourned.”

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CHAPTER 9

MEDRA



My stomach growled as Florence and I walked out of the boardroom. It was nearly eleven. The corridor beyond the headmaster's rooms was empty and quiet. Shadows flickered from the burning torches along the stone walls.

I turned to Florence. "Did I just make a terrible mistake?"

She looked at me with a confused expression.

"Rodriguez," I elaborated. "I basically just crowned him King of Bloodwing."

She huffed softly. Almost a laugh.

"Can you imagine?" I went on. "Rodriguez as headmaster? He was drunk all last term. What if it happens again? Or, worse, what if he gets drunk on power? Not to mention the fact that the high-bloods are going to riot."

"I think that was your strongest argument for why he'll be perfect," Florence said, smiling faintly.

"I hope so." I glanced at her. There were dark shadows under her eyes, and her shoulders were hunched. Even though she'd offered her help—and her dragon's—I could feel a distance between us. I felt desperate to bridge it. "Thank you for saying you'll help me with Blake," I said awkwardly. "It means a lot."

"Of course." She started to walk toward the other end of the corridor leading to the stairs.

I hurried after her. As I caught up, my stomach growled again—loudly. "I'm starving. You must be, too. Look, do you want to come with me to get something to eat?" She hesitated. "Not the refectory," I said quickly, knowing she sometimes felt anxious when there were too many people. "I was thinking of checking out the Vale."

The Vale was a new café that had opened up in an empty classroom near the library. It was run by some blightborn refugees—Veilmar locals. At first, it was supposed to be temporary. They'd thrown the place together in the span of just a few days to help Bloodwing feed the influx of newcomers. But now that many of the refugees who'd sought shelter in the school were slowly returning to the city, I'd heard rumors that the café would remain.

"I've heard the food is pretty good," I said. "And they have kava."

Florence frowned. "Won't it be closed?"

I shook my head. "No, they're open late. Apparently they're planning to have live music at night once things settle down more. They serve stronger drinks in the evenings, too. Maybe a glass of wine would do you good? Help you relax?" I was worried the suggestion might offend her, but her expression didn't change. It stayed blank and unreadable. Closed off. I smothered a sigh. "You know they named it for Professor Allenvale, right?"

Florence's dark eyes widened briefly. "I … didn't know that."

I nodded. "Maybe we can go eat, grab some drinks, then head to the library for a bit. Do some late-night research …" I'd thought the mention of the library would get her attention, but she was already shaking her head.

"I don't think so." She was trying to look regretful, but I could tell she wasn't. "I'm tired. I think I'll just go up and head to bed." She covered her mouth to stifle a yawn.

The thing was I knew she genuinely was tired: She looked it. But I was pretty sure she'd faked the yawn. *Why?* She just didn't want to be around me. Since we shared a room, that could get awkward fast. I decided not to think about it. For now, I decided I needed to give her more space.

I forced a smile. "Of course. I'll be really quiet when I come in. I promise I'll try not to snore."

She didn't laugh at my lame joke, just smiled briefly, then entered the stairwell. I watched her disappear, her calf-length black skirt swishing around her thighs, her silver cardigan pulled tight … and her head drooping. She was worried about something—or someone. Was it her mother? Blake? Me? My heart sped up. Or herself? What wasn't she telling me? I *would* get the truth out of her. She was my dearest friend, and there was only so long I'd let her shut me out. But first, I'd let her get some rest.

I walked away from the stairwell, heading in the direction of the library. I'd barely gone a dozen steps when someone sidled up beside me, their shorter legs easily matching my longer stride.

“How many hours did Rodriguez wind up keeping you trapped in that boardroom?” Visha drawled.

I grimaced. “More than five. And I think I was the one trapping him by the end.”

Visha laughed, showing her fangs. I studied her. She looked as she always did: carelessly at ease. Her pale hair was shaved on one side, the rest falling in a pale blond wave that just brushed her jaw. She wore a fitted black leather jacket over a loose crimson shirt that dipped low, showing her collarbone. Her trousers were skintight and sleek, but her boots were scuffed and practical. Hard with just a few touches of softness worked in.

“You look … well, you look hot.” I grinned, then nudged her playfully. “You going somewhere? Got a date?”

She shook her head. “Nah. I’m going to the Vale. With you. You look like you could use feeding.”

My stomach chose that moment to rumble again. “I do. In fact, there’s a high probability I may faint on the way and you’ll have to carry me.”

“Not a problem.” She fell into step beside me, shoving her hands into her trouser pockets. “Look, I knew I wasn’t supposed to stay for that last meeting. But I assume it was about Blake?”

“Yes, it was. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shut you out.” I looked at her, shaking my head. “Oh, Visha, I wasn’t thinking. Of course, you could have stayed—”

“It’s fine,” she cut me off. “I don’t have a dragon, and I’m not full of mysterious secrets. But I want you to know I’m here. For you—and for Blake. No matter what he’s done, I’m here.” She paused. “And all of that stuff you said …”

I waited a moment, then, “You mean about me being from another world?”

“Yeah, all that shit.” She shoved her hands deeper in her pockets and grimaced. “I believe you.”

“Thank you,” I said softly. “I appreciate that.” I knew she wasn’t one for hugs or shows of affection, so I made sure not to touch her. But after we’d walked a few more steps, she elbowed me—not hard. More like a pup might nip its sibling. I felt warmth spreading inside me, then I elbowed her right back. She laughed.

We were both silent for a few steps. We hadn’t gone far before a cluster of highblood students from House Mortis approached, heading the other

way. Almost all House Mortis students were high-bloods now. Since the other three houses had opened their doors to allow for a free choice, most blightborn students had left Mortis. The few who had stayed must have really wanted to be there. Or they were thralls, I thought uncomfortably.

We had not made any house give up their thralls—yet. But as far as I was concerned, that was a matter our new headmaster should be putting on his agenda. Overnight, Sangratha had changed. But outside of Bloodwing and the capital, Veilmar, few people probably realized how substantial those changes had been. But they would soon. And more changes were coming. I just hoped we would be able to sustain them. There was sure to be a backlash. But how big would it be?

As we neared the group, I was relieved to see Silvio Santos wasn't among them. But I recognized one face—Larissa Diamantis. She was one of Regan's closest friends. Well, she used to be. Larissa wasn't in House Drakharrow anymore, as she'd been kicked out along with Quinn Riley and everyone else who'd decided helping Silvio Santos bar the door to fleeing blightborn was a good idea.

As our two groups passed one another, I saw the Mortis students mutter among themselves.

"Ignore them," I whispered to Visha. "Remember—food is the goal."

She nodded curtly, and all seemed to be going well, until Larissa stepped toward us. "Blood traitor," she spat at Visha. "How dare you show your face—"

But that was all she had time to say before Visha lunged. Visha hissed like a feral cat, her violet eyes gleaming, fangs bared. Larissa stepped back, nearly tripping on another girl in her haste. Visha tugged at her jacket and laughed, a loud delighted sound. "Oh, relax, Larissa," she called, as the group fled down the hall. "If I'd wanted you dead like Lucian, you'd already be bleeding." She turned back to me, still smirking.

We resumed our walk. "So," I said casually, after a few paces in silence. "Is that happening a lot?"

She shrugged. "Here and there. Nothing I can't handle."

"Since Lucian?" I clarified.

Her shoulders lifted. "Highbloods will be highbloods."

"You're a highblood," I pointed out. "But somehow you manage not to be an asshole."

“Most would beg to differ there.” She shot me a sideways glance. “Stop worrying about me, Medra. You have more important things to focus on.”

I drew in a breath. “Right. But you did kill your archon.”

“*Future* archon.”

“Former fiancé, then. And you’d once been … close.”

“What are you trying to ask, Medra? Spit it out.”

“I’m trying to ask if you’re all right,” I said desperately. “I know you did what you had to do, but it still must have hurt.”

She stopped suddenly. “It didn’t hurt. It felt fucking good. Lucian deserved it.” She studied me. “Now you think I’m a high-blood monster, too.”

“No.” I shook my head quickly. “I think we’re all a little fucked up right now.”

Visha smirked. “Understatement of the year. Do you think they’ll put that in the yearbook?”

“Bloodwing has a yearbook?” I’d been there for two years yet had somehow missed that small detail. But in my defense, there’d been a lot going on.

Visha laughed and started walking again. “Of course there’s a yearbook. I’m surprised Florence Shen isn’t on the committee already. They’ll probably label us the *Most Fucked-Up Class to Succeed*.”

I snorted. “Considering what’s going on, let’s see if they ever print another yearbook at all.”

“Oh, they will. Bloodwing’s not going anywhere. Besides, I thought that was what we wanted,” she said lightly. “Nowhere else to go, for some of us.”

That hit me hard. I already knew she hadn’t had any updates from her family. And I knew she wouldn’t want me to ask again. “Blake told me you were seeing someone,” I blurted. “I hope they’re a comfort.”

“Oh, you mean fucking Rodriguez?” I wasn’t sure if she was describing the man himself or their activities. Visha wrinkled her nose. “A comfort? I’m not sure that’s how I’d have described it.” She snorted. “Bloodmaiden, Medra! Is that how you choose who you’re going to fuck?”

I choked. “Well, no.”

She tilted her head. “Maybe you’re not so far off. It was basically hate-sex. He was a grief-fuck, you know? Mutual bad decisions. Maybe just a little therapeutic.”

"*Therapeutic*," I repeated.

She punched my arm lightly. "Don't tell me you can't relate at least a little."

I cleared my throat. "All right, maybe just a little. But I don't hate Blake. Not anymore." Compared to how it had first begun, my relationship with Blake was becoming.… well, maybe not exactly healthy. But we'd been heading in a good direction. Until …

She grinned. "Yeah, I think we can tell. Anyhow, things with Rodriguez are over." She shrugged. "At least he wasn't a dick about it. I don't think I broke his heart, if that's what you're worried about."

"And now?"

She looked straight ahead. "Now I think it's time to be single for a while. Maybe forever."

I raised a brow. "Forever?" That didn't sound like Visha. But she had lost someone she'd cared about. I knew she'd fallen for Lace Ironstride hard and fast. "That's an awfully long time. Let's just take it one step at a time."

She nodded. "Here we are."

Warm light spilled from beneath a classroom door. An old window frame that looked like it had been salvaged from the green-house hung over the doorframe, painted in glittery gold. *Vasanti's Vale* was written in crooked purple letters across the center. Springs of dried flowers and herbs were tied all over the edges of the frame with pieces of colorful twine.

Visha pushed the door open. Instantly, noise spilled out. Inside, the air smelled like kava and spiced stew, with the lingering scent of old alcohol already curdling beneath it. The furniture was a patchwork of Bloodwing leftovers. Old classroom tables and desks had been set with mismatched chairs. A long alchemy table had been repurposed as bar seating. Potted plants crowded every available surface and hung from the ceiling. Old botanical sketches and alchemical recipes had been put in pretty frames and hung all over the walls. A large chalkboard hung behind the counter, listing all of the daily specials in a messy hand. Someone had drawn little pictures of leaves and flowers in each corner in colored chalk. Nothing matched, and yet somehow it worked. It was cozy and comfortable.

I thought of Professor Allenvale, then I thought of Florence. I wish she'd come along to see the place.

Beside me Visha was quiet. I knew she must be thinking about Allenvale, too. She'd been there when the professor was killed.

Considering the late hour, the place was packed. Students filled every table, talking loudly. I spotted a few faculty members seated at the bar. Thankfully Rodriguez wasn't among them, but then, he seemed to prefer to drink alone. I could only hope his new appointment would be a deterrent to that, going forward.

The faint sound of music drifted toward us. Up on a small stage, a blightborn girl in House Orphos colors sat strumming a guitar. Apparently the Vale was already trying out live music. Unfortunately, we could hardly hear the girl's song because of the loud, raucous laughter coming from one corner of the room.

Visha's hand clamped down on my arm. "What the fuck," she hissed. I followed her gaze.

Theo Drakharrow was over in the corner, standing on a chair. He was wobbling and gesturing wildly, one arm thrown out for balance, the other clutching a drink that sloshed precariously. His voice cut across the room, and I flinched. He was reciting a filthy limerick with impressive disregard for appropriateness. A ring of highblood students surrounded him, all laughing too loudly. None of them were people he usually spent time with. A few faces I recognized from Mortis. Theo's eyes were even more bloodshot than they'd been back in the boardroom.

"He's wasted," Visha said in disgust. "What a fucking idiot."

The blightborn staff behind the counter shot Theo dark looks, clearly trying to decide whether or not to intervene. But Visha was already moving. I followed her as she cut through the crowd.

"Hey, Theo!" she shouted as she reached where he swayed on the chair.

He barely had time to register her. "Oh, hello, Vish—"

She yanked him off the chair before he could finish saying her name, and it fell with a clatter. Theo staggered, nearly falling, and she caught him by the front of his shirt, giving him a little shake like a mother cat might do with a kitten. "Don't you dare puke on me," she warned.

"What's the problem?" he slurred, annoyance crossing his face. "We're just having some fun."

Visha ignored him, turning to fix the other highbloods with a cold look. "What the fuck are you all looking at? The party's over. Get the fuck out," she ordered.

One by one they started to back away. I picked up the chair and held it out as Visha dropped Theo.

“What the hell, Visha!” Theo protested, his voice still slurred but now tinged with irritation.

But she’d already stomped off. She came back a minute later, holding two mugs of kava. “Here. Drink up, party boy.”

Theo looked down at the cups suspiciously. He sniffed. “What’s this?” He leaned forward and then gagged. “Bloodmaiden, it smells fucking awful.”

Visha leaned over and grabbed him by the collar. “You’re right, it does. It’s called Fuck-Around-and-Find-Out.”

Theo narrowed his eyes. “Find out?”

“Find out what happens if you don’t drink it,” she clarified. “It’s a special Vaidya brew. You’re lucky the bartender happened to have the ingredients for it.”

“Lucky?” Theo repeated, looking dubious.

I peered at the mug. I could see a raw egg floating near the top. I thought I smelled fish. That was enough for me. “I hope you’re not expecting me to drink the other mug,” I muttered to Visha.

“Nope, that one’s for Theo, too.” Abruptly, she grabbed him, pinched the bridge of his nose and tilted his head back. “Drink up, buttercup.” Then, before he could stop her, she poured half the mug down his throat.

He sputtered, gagging, but had no choice but to swallow. “Fuck, Visha!” he bellowed as he wiped his mouth. “That was—” She did it again. Theo was groaning with his head on the table by the time the mugs were empty. “You’re a terrible friend,” he moaned. “That was the foulest thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“I am an incredible friend,” Visha countered sweetly. “And you were being an incredible asshole. You don’t like being an asshole. That’s not who you are.”

He shrugged his shoulders sullenly. “Maybe it is now. Who cares anymore?”

“What’s really going on, Theo?” I asked. “And why weren’t you sitting by Vaughn today at the meeting?”

He narrowed his eyes at me. Whatever Visha had put in those mugs was already working. His eyes were already substantially less bloodshot. “Vaughn?”

“Yes, Vaughn.” I thought I understood. “Is it because of Blake? Because Vaughn was the one who brought the chains?” I glanced at Visha. “I wasn’t

pleased about that either. But I understood why he did it. His intentions were good."

"I understand why he did it, too," Theo said dully. "And sure, I don't blame him. But as for Vaughn and me?" He shook his head. "It's pointless, we're never going to work. He's a blightborn. And I'm … I'm a high …" He burped and I smelled fish.

My nose wrinkled.

"You're an idiot is what you are," Visha said, rolling her eyes. "Besides, aren't you a romantic? *Love conquers all*—isn't that what they say?"

Theo studied her. Some more of the drunken bravado seemed to drain out of his face. "Love? Can a highblood even feel love?" He looked down at the empty mugs on the table. "You want to hear one of my favorite childhood memories? I was eight, maybe nine. The Drakharrows own an estate up north. The place is like a park, absolutely beautiful—forested land, riding trails, a big hunting lodge. Exclusively for highbloods, of course. We're the holy, pure-blooded stewards of Sangratha, after all." He gave a mirthless laugh. "Anyhow, the grown-ups threw a hunt. A festival, really. Horses and banners, servants scurrying everywhere with food and wine." He stared off into space. "The day of the big hunt, I snuck away from my tutor and climbed a tree to watch."

I held my breath. Visha didn't interrupt. She crossed her arms, listening.

"Of course, you already know what I'm going to say," Theo went on, eyeing her. "Your family was probably the same. They weren't hunting deer or rabbits. Were they?" He gave a bitter laugh.

My skin started to crawl.

"No, they were hunting a blightborn boy. Not much older than me. They let him run first, gave him a head start. Everyone thought it was hilarious. They drank bloodwine, they placed bets."

I felt sick.

"He ran into the woods, then they chased him on horseback like it was a sport. I watched him trip on a tree root. Get dragged back by the hair. They circled him like a pack of dogs."

The café noise faded. All I could hear was Theo's voice. I was imagining it all in detail as he spoke. The green branches that camouflaged him as he hid. The blightborn boy's terror as the high-bloods caught him.

"They drank from him," Theo said flatly. "One after another. Until he passed out. I thought he was dead. But then I watched them gamble over

who'd get to keep him as their thrall, so I knew he wasn't. Maybe he wished he was later. Who can say."

"Whose?" I whispered in horror. "Whose hunt was it?"

"And that was a good outcome," Theo added, ignoring me. "The hunts were unsanctioned, but they happened. They might have just killed him. Lots of highblood hunts ended that way. You know they did, Vish."

"Was this Viktor's estate?" I prodded.

He didn't look at me. "The point," he said, still looking at Visha, "is that Vaughn and I are doomed. You can't undo centuries of something like that. You can't fix it with words of love or good intentions." He gave a bitter laugh. "A plague that infects only highbloods? Now, that's fucking justice. It's exactly what we all deserve."

Visha straightened up. "So that's it? That's your excuse for why you were acting like a drunk idiot in a blightborn café, surrounded by the worst trash you could find?"

Theo flinched. "I wasn't—"

"You were standing on a chair like you owned the place. Like an arrogant asshole."

He sighed. "When you put it like that …" He picked up a mug and shook it. "Got any more of this stuff? I think it's growing on me." He looked over at me. "I was just trying to forget for a while."

"Forget what?" I said softly.

"Everything. The plague. The city. Vaughn. Me." His voice cracked. "Especially me."

"I don't understand," I whispered.

"I don't want to be what I am," Theo said hoarsely. "I don't want to be Theo Drakharrow, anymore. Not tonight, not—"

"Theo." A woman's voice. Sharp and regal. Our heads swiveled toward it. "I need to speak with you, Theodore. Get up." An elegant highblood woman stood there, impeccably dressed in a crimson skirt and jacket of rich brocade. Her jewelry was understated but unmistakably expensive. Her pale blond hair was swept up into a smooth chignon, every hair perfectly in place.

I knew at once who this must be: Theo's mother. Blake's aunt. Viktor's younger sister.

Everything about her screamed highblood wealth and privilege. But it was her eyes that held my attention the most. They were an uncanny replica

of her older brother's. Except Theo's mother's pupils were a lighter gray, not an unsettling shade of red.

"Theodore, get up," the woman repeated. She glanced around the room as if she were uncomfortable being there. I stared at her. She was so unlike Theo in every way. Undeniably aristocratic—and yet there was something off about her. As if she were trying to project confidence but still doubted her own value, despite all her trappings of wealth and privilege. "I need to speak to you. Alone."

"Yes, you've already said that," Theo replied. He glanced at me. "This is my mother, Medra." He raised a hand, gesturing to me, then the woman. "Medra Pendragon, meet Aryel Drakharrow."

Aryel stared down at me coldly. Neither of us said anything. "Alone, Theo," Aryel Drakharrow finally repeated with a frown. She tapped her foot impatiently.

"Fine," Theo said loudly. He stumbled to his feet, swaying only slightly now as he followed her to the door.

I looked at Visha. "What was that all about?"

She shrugged. "I'm sure we'll find out soon. I'll go get some food." She headed to the counter before I could argue.

A server was just placing a tray loaded with mugs of kava, steaming bowls of a yellow curry chicken stew, and soft hot buttered bread on the table when Theo returned, slamming the door to the café behind him. He sank back down into his chair looking distinctly miserable.

"So," I said carefully, swallowing a bite, "that was your mother?"

He nodded tightly. "She's not just my mother now. With Viktor and Blake both missing, she's the head of our house. Not that she wants the position."

"She doesn't?" I said curiously.

He shook his head. "She'd prefer to stay out of sight. Go to lots of fancy parties. Pretend I don't exist."

I stared. "That sounds … horrible." But it did sort of explain a lot about Theo. "Was she one of the hunters that day in the woods?" He nodded. "Right." I shredded a piece of bread.

"Anyhow, until Blake gets back, she wants me to step up." He glanced at Visha. "You know I don't want to. Nothing will change."

"It has to change a little. You have to keep order," she said mildly. "Until Blake gets back."

Theo looked relieved. “Yes, until Blake is back.” He glanced at me. “What’s the plan for that, anyhow?”

“I’m working on it.” I looked between the two of them, suddenly realizing something. If they could help, maybe there’d be no more need to take dark rituals into my own hands—or to involve Rodriguez more than necessary. “How skilled at blood magic are you two?”

“I’m middling, but Theo’s proficient. He’s one of the best in our house,” Visha said immediately. She leaned forward. “Why? What’s the plan?”

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CHAPTER 10

FLORENCE



Can I tell you something, Medra? All my life I've wanted to be one."

The words floated unbidden into my head as I drifted off to sleep. A highblood. I'd told Medra once I wished I were a highblood. Why in the Bloodmaiden's name was I remembering that now? The memory felt sour. Embarrassing. Like something a foolish child would say without realizing the cost of their wish. I was an adult. I knew how the world worked now. Everything was complicated. Everything was corrupt. Secrets layered on secrets. And right now, mine felt so heavy.

I couldn't tell anyone about Nyxaris. Not about what he could do or what we'd shared. He'd been distant ever since we'd returned from Veilmar. Polite. Formal. Withdrawn. Every night I fell asleep replaying what had happened between us in my mind. Searching for what I'd done wrong—surely, I had done something wrong. Had I been too eager? Too young? Just … too much?

I couldn't even ask Medra for advice. I didn't have Nyxaris's permission to share this secret with her—not yet. I didn't know what consequences there might be when I did either, for him or for me. So I lay there in the dark, very small and quiet, and wrapped in a shame I could not even name. Sleep finally slid over me, and then I was dreaming.

I was walking through a village at dusk. Lamps were just beginning to glow in the windows of the small houses that lined the street. I was young—perhaps ten or eleven. My hand was clasped in my father's, and I swung on his arm, laughing. Wei Shen smiled down at me, his grip instinctively tightening, steadying me so I didn't slip away. My father was quietly handsome in a bookish way, with sharp, dark eyes and strong cheekbones. His black hair shone like mine, but it was shorter, though strands fell in his

eyes as he smiled down at me. He wore simple homespun clothes, worn but clean and neat. Hanging from his free hand was a basket full of books he was bringing home for my mother.

"She says I work too hard, Florence. But I never tell her she reads too hard," he joked.

I laughed in delight. We were nearly at the end of the street, about to turn the corner. Home was only a few minutes' walk away. Then the doors of a nearby pub burst open, and a group of highblood youths staggered out. They were clearly from the city. I stared at their fine-cut clothes, their velvet cloaks, their disheveled hair, and their eyes—bright and unfocused. Their voices were raised in drunken laughter, and I caught a strange scent.

"Come on, Florence," my father said, his voice suddenly sharp. "Let's get home to your mother."

But it was too late. They'd seen us.

A tall young woman staggered over, pulling another girl behind her. They were twins, I realized. Unmistakable. Both with pale, beautiful hair. Both dressed far too richly for a village like ours.

The girl in front smiled. "Well, look at this. Out for an evening stroll, are we?"

The other sister lingered half a step behind, something like pity in her eyes, as the others in their group began to spread out around us.

My father's hand tightened briefly around mine. Then he let go. "Florence," he murmured, "I want you to run."

I stared at him, heart pounding. I didn't want to leave him. The world was tilting, and I did not want to be alone.

"Did you hear me?" His voice was sharp. "You need to run, Florence. Run. Right now." His hand was suddenly at my back, pushing me forward, propelling me out of the circle that was quickly tightening around us like a noose.

"Papa!" I cried, turning back.

"I'll take you to your papa, little girl." I heard a rough masculine laugh and looked up to see a huge highblood boy grinning down at me.

In my sleep, my body stiffened. I recognized him: Marcus Drakhar-row. In the dream, the younger me screamed and began to run.

Marcus chased after me, cursing drunkenly as he stumbled, his fine leather boots slipping in the dirt. I veered sharply down an alley. It was dark, but we'd already walked that way, so I knew what I'd find. I felt with

my hands, clambering up onto a wagon piled high with loose hay, pulling the pieces on top of myself. My heart pounded. I felt like I was going to throw up. I held very still.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," the boy's voice called. He gave a deep laugh. "You can't hide, little girl. I'm going to find you."

He stepped past the wagon. I could see him through the cracks in the boards. I held my breath, squeezing back the sobs that threatened to spill from my mouth. I heard him reach the end of the alley and pause.

"I'm tired of this game, little girl. Come out now. Or you won't like what happens when I catch you." He softened his voice. "Come out now, and I'll bring you back to Papa. That's a good girl."

I closed my eyes. I heard him swear, then heard pounding footsteps. He ran past me.

I waited. Then slowly I pushed my way out. The alley was empty. Quickly I scrambled up onto the top of the pile of hay. My fingers reached for the gutter of the nearby house. I hauled myself up onto the roof, skinning my palms on the rough shingles. I moved slowly, crawling behind a chimney. Then I looked down.

The youths had surrounded my father. They shoved him back and forth, laughing hysterically when he fell to his knees. They mocked him as he got back up to his feet, only to push him down again.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to run. I wanted to go to him.

But instead, I stayed there, curled in on myself. Frozen. Terrified. Helpless. Useless. Until it was too late.

He stumbled one last time, and this time they didn't let him get back up. They moved forward, shielding him with their bodies as they fell upon him with their fangs bared. I listened as they tore into him without restraint, until finally his cries went quiet. Until there was nothing left to take from him.

When they finally backed away from his body, wiping their mouths and licking their lips, he lay in the dirt like refuse they'd discarded. His skin was pale. His body was still. The basket he'd been carrying lay flattened in the dirt. The books had spilled out and were open, their pages ripped and dirty. The youths didn't look back once. Instead, they moved onto the next game. They grabbed torches. Moving down the street laughing and shrieking wildly, they pressed flame to thatch and wood. Fire bloomed, quickly

leaping from house to house. Someone tossed a torch into the wagon of hay next to the roof on which I hid, and it burst into orange incandescent light.

Blood trickled down my chin from where my teeth had clamped down hard on my lower lip. My cheeks felt gritty, stained with tears and dirt. Everything I loved was turning to ash.

I woke with a gasp, my chest heaving, lungs burning as if I'd really swallowed all that smoke. A sob cracked my chest. It hadn't been a dream, it had been real. I could feel the certainty in my very bones. The memory hadn't been a dream. Somehow, it had been taken from me—only to come flooding back now.

My hands shook as I swung my legs over the side of the bed. I didn't bother lighting a lamp. I dragged a robe out of the wardrobe, pulling it on hastily over my long white cotton nightgown, then wrenched the door open. I ran through the corridors, down the stairs, out of the Avari tower. The halls were quiet. The lamps had been dimmed. My bare feet slapped against the cold stone as I flew past arched windows. I turned a corner, nearly running into a pair of sleepy-looking students. They stared at me strangely, but I didn't care. I didn't stop, and I didn't apologize. I kept going until I reached the door. Even then, I didn't hesitate. I raised my fist and hammered on the wood. Once, twice, again.

There was muffled movement inside. "Who is it?" Her voice was heavy with sleep.

"Mother, it's me. Open the door."

It cracked open. My mother stood there, holding the scruff of her robe tight to her chin, her eyes wide, her long, dark hair loose around her shoulders. For a moment, I stared. She looked different with her glasses off. Younger and smaller somehow.

"Florence? What's wrong?" She glanced back into the hall. "Are you hurt?"

I could see the fear rising in her eyes. She'd already been through so much. But I couldn't allow myself to care about that right now. "How did my father die? How did he really die?"

My mother's hands started to shake. "What do you mean?"

"No more lies," I cried. "I saw it. I saw what really happened. He was murdered, wasn't he? Did highbloods kill him?"

"Florence," she began to say weakly.

“No, Mother.” Tears streamed down my face. “You told me he was caught in a fire. You told me there was an accident. That it was quick. Peaceful.” I curled my hands into fists. “I saw it, Mother. It wasn’t peaceful.”

She swayed against the doorframe, her face pale. “Florence.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why couldn’t I remember?”

Her breath caught. She pressed a hand to her mouth.

“What did you do to me?” I demanded, my voice harsh.

“I did what I had to do,” she whispered. “To protect you.”

“You erased it. You erased part of *me*. How?”

My mother looked up at me. “I couldn’t let that terrible memory destroy you. You’d stopped speaking. You woke up screaming every night. You were so afraid.” Her voice broke. “You were frightened of laughter, of the sound of stomping feet. You were so young. It seemed so unfair that you had survived—and yet been left so broken.”

“So you broke me instead?” I said quietly. “How?”

“Thrallweave,” she whispered. “We’d moved by then. I was working for a noble family. The mother saw the state you were in, and she offered. She was adept at the magic. She promised me it would make life easier for you. The gesture seemed so kind. Leaving you like that seemed so much crueler.”

I stumbled back blindly, tears fogging my eyes.

I could hear my mother start to sob. “Florence, I’m sorry. Florence, please. Come inside.”

But I just kept backing away. A few steps, then a few more. Until I turned and ran. I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t care. I ran blindly. Behind me, my mother called my name again. But I didn’t slow. I fled down the hall like a ghost, robe flying open, tears clouding my vision. I ran until there were no walls around me. Until the castle fell away and the night surrounded me.

Black sea stretched out before me. Cool sand crumbled beneath my feet. I could hear the waves hissing softly as they met the shore, like breathing in the dark. The wind tugged at my robe and my loose hair, sharp and salty. I walked slowly until my feet hit wet sand. Then I paced along the shore. The tears kept coming. I didn’t brush them away.

Fireheart.

I flinched but didn’t answer.

Tell me what is happening. Where are you?

I pressed my lips together, jaw tight. Now he wanted to talk. After he'd ignored me for days.

Florence, please. His voice sharpened. Command threading with concern. *Where are you?*

The beach. Leave me alone.

I barely registered the warm glow until I stepped into it. Suddenly I was illuminated in orange and gold. A low fire crackled with driftwood. Around it lounged a group of students, most of them from House Mortis by the colors of their clothes. I stopped, blinking. Realizing I'd made a terrible mistake.

"Well, hello there," one of the boys said, already rising to his feet. His eyes raked over me. "You're rather pretty."

"She's in her nightclothes," a girl said and giggled. "She looks ridiculous."

I tugged my robe around myself, suddenly realizing how thin the cotton gown underneath was and how translucent it must be in the firelight.

"No, leave it open," the boy urged, grinning down at my body. "I insist. I liked it better that way."

I ignored him and took a step to move past. I'd been here once before. How had I made such a stupid mistake a second time? Why had I thought Bloodwing would somehow be safer now? It would never be safe for the likes of me.

"Look, she's been crying," another girl observed. "Did someone hurt your feelings, little blightborn?"

"Hey," the boy snapped. "Your robe. I told you to leave it open."

I froze. His voice was thick with thrallweave.

"In fact, you can unbutton that nightdress of yours, too."

My hand trembled on the fabric of my robe. I suddenly felt very detached from my body. "Fuck off," I heard myself say distantly.

The highbloods' laughter stuttered to a halt. The boy's grin dropped. "What did you just say?"

His eyes hardened. He stepped closer, and I felt a familiar pressure brush my mind. But this wasn't like Nyxaris's touch when he tested my guard. No, this was slick and invasive. Like a rotten vine trying to prod its way in. I raised my shields without even thinking, the walls of my garden slamming down into place, every clean green tendril taking root instantly.

The highblood boy hissed in surprise and stumbled backward.

"That won't work on me," I said quietly. Maybe if the boy had been stronger with his power it would have. But my shields were enough to keep him at bay. I'd been practicing. I started to step out of the circle of their light, just wanting to get away.

The boy's hand caught my arm roughly, yanking me back. "That still doesn't mean you get to leave, you stupid bitch."

I looked down at the boy's arm. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Why not?" he scoffed.

I tilted my head upward, listening. "Can't you hear it?"

"Hear what?" a girl said aloud. Then someone gasped.

"The wings," I whispered softly.

The night broke as Nyxaris swooped down from the sky like an avenging star. By the time the firelight lit up his obsidian scales it was far too late. The air shattered as his wings beat, sending hot embers and pieces of firewood flying over the sand. Screams erupted. The youths tripped over one another in panic, racing away across the sand. Some ran fast enough. Most did not. Nyxaris swept low over the beach, fire pouring from his jaws. Figures fell, burning, collapsing, and smoking on the sand.

The boy swore, then yanked me hard, sending me flying back against his chest. I could feel his breath hot and panicked just above my head. "If I die, you die, too," he snarled. I could feel him shaking. I didn't answer.

Nyxaris landed, and the earth shook. The boy stumbled but didn't lose his grip, even as the massive black dragon prowled toward us, as beautiful and terrible as the face of night. He roared, then let fire roll again from his throat, scorching the sand a little ways from where we stood—close enough that I could feel the heat.

"Fuck," the boy sobbed. "Oh shit."

Tell me what you wish to happen next, Nyxaris said, his voice dark and resonant in my mind.

I stared at him, tears still falling from my eyes, the sound of the sea all around us. *I'm tired. Tired of being afraid. Of being weak.* I looked into his merciless ember eyes. *I used to adore them. Worship them.*

And now?

I want them to fear me as much as I fear them.

Before the boy holding me could react, I smashed my head back and heard the crack of bone. He cried out, hands flying to his face as I tore free

of him and ran, plunging straight out into the sea. Behind me, I heard the crackle of flames as cold waves splashed around my calves. I waded deeper, feeling the water touch my thighs. I stopped there, shaking violently, my teeth chattering as the night closed in again.

I heard someone enter the water behind me. “Come back to the beach, Florence. Please. You’ll freeze to death out here.”

I stayed where I was, my back still turned.

“Fireheart,” Nyxaris said carefully, “come back to shore.”

I took another step forward. The hem of my robe clung to my skin, heavy with seawater. I moved deeper. The water climbed my body until it pressed beneath my breasts. I gasped at the sensation, but I didn’t turn. I stared out at the black horizon. For a moment, I wished I could just disappear.

Behind me, Nyxaris swore softly. I knew he wasn’t angry. He was afraid. I heard the water splash behind me. Then his hand brushed my arm. “Florence, please.” I stiffened. He quickly removed his hand.

Slowly, I turned to face him. He was waist-deep in the water. It lapped against his hips, sliding over golden skin and hard muscle. Behind him his godlike black wings loomed like half-folded midnight blades.

He was lit up by starlight. There were old scars on his chest beneath the celestial patterns. I hadn’t noticed them before. His hair fell around his shoulders. His amber eyes searched mine—hesitant and uncertain in a way I’d never seen them before. He was a god in the shape of a man.

He was a highblood.

“We serve the blood, we serve the line,” I whispered.

He flinched. “Florence, no.”

“The highbloods lead, by right divine. In blood we trust, in grace we stand.” My voice cracked. “The highbloods guide us, hand in hand.”

He closed his eyes. “What happened?”

“I saw the truth,” I said clearly. “I remembered.”

“What did you remember?”

“My father. How he died. I was there.” I stopped. “Highbloods murdered him—Blake’s brother, Marcus, murdered him.”

Nyxaris’s eyes opened. They were full of sorrow and regret—and something that went beyond both those things. Loathing. But not for me. “I was afraid this might happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your ability to block thrallweave, our bond. It’s more difficult for compulsion magic to touch you now. If someone previously used magic to … help you block certain things out, well, those blocks are probably crumbling away.”

I stared at him, wide-eyed. “Help? Did this help me, what she did?”

He looked helpless. “I don’t know, Florence. Who did this to you?”

“My mother.” I corrected myself, “A highblood woman she worked for. But my mother gave her permission.”

His eyes softened. “Then, your mother must have had good intentions. I know she loves you very much. But she did this without your consent. She should have asked you. To find out this way must feel like a great betrayal.”

“Betrayal?” I nodded. “I do feel betrayed. But not just by her.”

He didn’t bother to deny it.

“Why did you go away?” My voice cracked. “Why did you leave me alone? What did I do wrong? I needed you. I needed you, Nyxaris, and you weren’t there.”

“I’m here now.”

“But where were you before?”

His eyes were tortured. “Don’t you understand? Now more than ever I would have thought it would be clear.”

I shook my head. “What should be clear?”

“I’m a highblood,” he choked out. “What I did with you in that field … was utterly undeserving.”

“What *you* did? You mean what we did? What we did together.” I shook my head. “I didn’t think you were undeserving. I thought it was beautiful.”

“Oh, fuck, Florence,” he whispered. He clenched his hands into fists. “It was beautiful. But …”

“But what?” My heart was breaking in two. “You don’t want me. Say it, then.”

“You think I don’t want you?” he cried. “I’m afraid to use you up. I’m a highblood, and because I am I don’t deserve you. I am beneath you in every way.” His voice was ragged. “Don’t you understand? It’s me who should be walking out into the sea. Not you. Never you, beautiful Fireheart.”

A sob broke from my chest. He reached out a hand as if to touch my face, then lowered it again.

“I killed him,” I whispered. “I ran away. I didn’t help.”

“You were just a child, my love. Just a little girl. You couldn’t help him.” His face was full of pain as he saw my own. “But you can help others now.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. Not without you. I’m nothing on my own. Just a frightened blightborn girl.”

“That’s far from the truth, Fireheart. Your heart is full of courage—or you would not rail against the injustice of the world or feel such pain.” He looked away, staring out to sea. “I have done terrible things. As a beast, yes. But as a man, I believe I was little better than a beast. I don’t deserve to be with you. To share this perfect bond.”

“That’s not true,” I whispered. “You’ve helped me. You’ve helped others.”

“Yes, only when you begged me. I did not offer my service unasked. I made you beg.” He shook his head as he looked down at me. “Look at you, shivering in the sea. You nearly died tonight. And why was that? Because of highbloods.” His face turned to disgust. “Always highbloods. We destroy all that is good, all that is pure. I cannot let that happen to you, Fireheart.”

“But it already has.” My voice was small. “That boy just now. I killed him. I wanted to hurt him.” I raised my hands and covered my face with shame. “I hate myself for it now.” My body shook.

“Fireheart, no!” The roar poured out of him. “Enough.”

His hands reached for me, scooping me up out of the water. He cradled me to his chest as I cried, wading from the sea and back onto the shore. Then he gently laid me down in the sand and lay beside me, pulling me onto his wing, against his chest. I let him. We stayed like that until my shivering had stopped, both of us silent. Above us the stars spread out, watching us, a dragon and a mortal girl.

“I did not mean to make you feel unwanted,” Nyxaris whispered against my hair. “Forgive me.”

I tilted my head up to look at him. “You came back only to save me. Not because you truly wish to be here.”

He sighed. “I wish to be here. I wish to be with you all the time.”

Something sprung up in my heart, hot and hopeful.

“But this … this can’t be. You deserve someone young and pure. Someone who is …”

“Not a highblood,” I whispered.

“Not a highblood. No one who is part of my race deserves to be with someone like you.”

“But it’s you I want. My heart only wants you.” He went very still, and my walls crumbled. “I need you, Nyxaris. Don’t shut me out. Please. Will you make me beg again?”

His eyes widened with shock. “Never.” His voice trembled. “Never,” he repeated a little louder. His hand came up, and this time it did not stop halfway. His fingers slid into my wet hair, warm against my scalp. He lowered his forehead to mine, his other wing curving around us. “I will never make you beg again,” Nyxaris whispered hoarsely. “Not for my presence. Not for my care. Not for my love.”

The last word landed between us like a hot coal. I wanted to pick it up with both hands and cradle it to my chest. But I knew how scorching the word was. How powerful it could be.

I sucked in my breath, trembling. “I don’t want to be afraid of the world anymore. I want to face it—with you.” His breath caught. “I’ve always been afraid,” I confessed. “I’m angry. I’m broken in ways I don’t understand yet. What I did just now, I’m ashamed of. I don’t want to be cruel.” I reached up, my fingers brushing along his jaw, marveling at the sheer beauty of this man. “But I’m not ashamed of wanting you.”

Nyxaris bent his head slowly, giving me every chance to pull away. When his lips touched my hair, it was reverent. When he kissed my temple, it was worshipful. When he pressed his mouth to mine, it was like a vow. “I will stay. If you will have me. But not merely as your shield—nor as your god. Let it be as your equal—however imperfect I am.”

Tears spilled down my face. I nodded, too full of emotion to speak. I could feel the heat of him everywhere. The quiet reserve of power that always hummed, just beneath his skin—or scales.

“You’re forgetting something,” I murmured.

“What?”

I arched against him, pressing my wet body to his warm one. “You haven’t fed from me yet.” Saying the words was excruciating. I was suddenly aware of my pulse. Of how close his mouth was to my throat.

Nyxaris stiffened. His wings flexed around us. “No.”

“If we’re truly bonded now and if you’re going to continue to shift into this form, then you need blood … don’t you?”

“Supposedly.” He sounded cranky—and that was familiar and reassuring.

I laughed. Then I took a deep breath. “We’re doing this. What’s the alternative? Me letting you die?” The very thought sent my heart rate

spiking.

His jaw clenched. “I will not bite you. Not now. Not after what you just remembered.” His mouth twisted. “Not when I am one of those creatures.”

“Highblood,” I whispered. “It doesn’t have to be a curse.”

“But it is,” he snapped. “To me, to you. To bite you now would dishonor all you’ve lost.”

“Then, what do we do?”

He closed his eyes. “There is one solution. I will have to cease changing forms. To do so requires a great deal of power.”

“No. That can’t be the only way.” I shook my head stubbornly. “To be a highblood doesn’t have to mean destruction. I’ve heard …”

“What?”

I colored. “I’ve heard the bite can bring pleasure. Not only pain.”

His gaze dropped to my throat. Then jerked away again, as if the sight of my flesh there burned him. “You don’t understand what you’re asking, little one. If I started, then—”

“Then, what?”

“Do you know how long it’s been since I last tasted blood?” he growled. “No less, blood that is fresh and sweet from the throat of a willing woman who I …”

I thought I understood. “Your last rider. Was she the last one you drank from?” His head jerked affirmation. “What was her name? What happened to her?”

He was quiet for a while. Then, “Her name was Christina.”

“That’s a beautiful name.” Strangely it didn’t hurt me to speak of this woman. Nyxaris had loved her once. She had ridden on his back, sat where I now sat. But she had been dead for over one hundred years—she was a memory. One that had caused him so much pain and grief already. And based on what Nyxaris had already confided, she had died badly. “What happened to Christina?”

He went very still. For a moment, I couldn’t even feel him breathing. “Highbloods happened. I served an Avari master. When I rebelled against an order, they took Christina from me. They …” Silence again.

“They soul-bound her,” I whispered.

“Yes.”

“How?” I couldn’t help the question. After all, it could happen to me.

“It does not matter. For it will not happen to you,” Nyxaris said harshly, as if reading my thoughts. “Do you understand? I will never allow it to happen. I would rather die first.”

“Yes.” My voice was small. But I knew promises like that could not always be kept.

“No,” he thundered. “You do not.” He lifted up, his wing sliding away. I pushed myself to my feet, still shivering in my wet clothes, as he faced me. He gripped my chin—hard. “Look at me and tell me you understand.” His face suddenly softened. “What am I doing? I’m asking you to trust me. A highblood.” He shook his head. “I must be mad.”

“Not mad,” I said softly. I grasped his wrist. “I do trust you.”

“She did, too,” he said simply. “And she died.”

“I cannot imagine how much that must have hurt you.”

He gave a rough laugh. “Hurt me? She was the one who suffered. Her body claimed, used. Her soul suppressed.”

“They took her body?” It was a horrible thing—to imagine someone else in my body, controlling me.

“Yes. It could have gone the other way. Or they might have tethered her.”

I tried to picture it—a vivacious woman on a ruthless high-blood chain.

“But she was younger. Stronger. They chose to use her body.” A look of torment crossed his face. “I had to see her walking toward me, smiling. But it was not her. Only a small part of her was left. And it could not get out. Not until …”

“Until?”

A long stretch of silence. I listened to the waves crash on the beach.

“She wanted to die,” he said finally. “I knew that. I ignored it for as long as I could. Finally I could ignore it no longer.”

“You set her free.”

“I *killed* her. I wanted to kill the highbloods who had done it to her. I managed to do both.”

“You did the right thing.”

“Did I?” He released my chin and looked away. “I will never know.”

“You did,” I said softly. I stepped closer to him. Put my hands against his chest. They looked so small there. “I would have wanted the same, Nyxaris. You set her free.”

“The world is so cruel, Fireheart,” he said wearily. “And the cruelty never seems to end.”

“Yet there is good in the world. I have to believe that. There is still some beauty and kindness.”

“Is there?” He didn’t look convinced.

“Yes. Because you’re here, aren’t you? And you …” My throat threatened to close up. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. And the marvel is … You seem to want me, too.”

His head whipped toward me. “Me, want you? Me, beautiful? Then what are you?” He seized my shoulders. “What are you, Fireheart? You are not of this world. This world does not deserve a woman like you in it. So pure of heart, noble of soul, and your form …” He stopped. When he resumed, his voice was husky. “*Want* doesn’t begin to describe what I feel. I yearn. I have yearned for you from the moment I saw you lying in the courtyard, bleeding. But I was a coward. I feared losing you all over again—like Christina. And so I made your friend beg me to save you. I made her beg me for your life.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “But … I understand.”

“You do?”

“Of course. You didn’t want to lose another rider.” I touched his cheek. “You had spent so many years alone.”

“Yes. But it is no excuse for how cruelly and coldly I behaved.”

“Then, be warm with me now.” I pressed my breasts against his chest and lifted my face to his. “Take me now. I give you my blood and my body freely.”

A choked sound came from his mouth. “You don’t know what you offer.”

“I do,” I said stubbornly. “Trust me the way I trust you. I’m not afraid of you. You can’t keep punishing yourself for the past. Live with me here, now.” Tears were in my eyes again. “Or else what is the point of all this, Nyxaris? Tell me that. What is the point if we can’t be together the way you know we’re supposed to be?”

I felt his body tremble.

“You smell too sweet,” he whispered finally. “And you are standing far too close.”

“Would you like me to go back to my room?”

For a moment, he didn’t move. He held as still as the statue he used to be. Then his hand came up, hovering at my waist—not quite touching. I pressed it to my hips. The moment his fingers closed there, I felt something

in him snap into place. He pulled me closer, his wings tightening around us, sealing us into his shadows.

His breath ghosted along my neck. “If I start … Tell me to stop now, Florence. For if I start …”

“I won’t ask you to stop,” I swore.

He groaned, deep and low in his throat, and the sound vibrated straight through me. His mouth brushed my skin—not biting, not yet. But it was enough for my knees to tremble.

“You are undoing me,” he murmured.

“Then, come undone,” I breathed.

His teeth sank into me. Entering me with a dizzying intimacy that stole my breath. I gasped, fingers clutching into his shoulders, my body slamming against his. Heat flared through me. I could feel him drawing me into him—the living thread of my blood. There was pain, yes, but only a little. Mostly it felt good. Very, very good. Like a blissful fire spreading all through my veins.

Nyxaris groaned against my skin, the sound unguarded and raw.

“I need you,” I gasped. “Please.”

He shuddered. His mouth broke away, a growl slipping free. His hands tightened at my waist, lifting me. Then I was being laid down with infinite gentleness, my wet clothes pulled aside.

“I can’t be slow. This is … a bad idea.” He had to force the words out. I could see the frustration in his eyes.

“I don’t want slow this time,” I whispered. “Please.” I pulled him down on top of me, moaning as our bodies met. His skin was warm and bare, and the pressure of him on me felt so good. He trailed his tongue over the bite marks on my throat. I could feel the softness of stubble, ever so faintly, as I raised my hand to his cheek.

And then his fangs sunk deep as his cock slid between my thighs and he was filling me, draining me, lighting me on fire from head to toe, his fingers bruising my waist as he thrust and drank, thrust and drank.

It was creation and destruction. It was as natural as the rhythm of the waves. I cried out as he drove his hard length inside me, all thoughts of anything beyond him flying away. There were no walls, no barriers to keep us apart. My body melted beneath his touch. I came like a wave crashing on the beach. He wanted me. He needed me. And me? I loved him.

In this world and in any other, in this life or the next—I was quite simply *his*.

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CHAPTER 11

MEDRA



Somehow, spring had crept over Bloodwing without me even noticing. Green shoots pushed through every crack in the stone paths. Ivy climbed the outer walls, new leaves curling. The air was different—warmer, softer, scented with earth and the moisture of growing things. It wasn't an unwelcome change … compared to the odors of smoke and blood.

Veilmar was slowly healing. The rebuilding efforts continued at a steady pace, scaffolding rising up over the city where buildings had fallen. People seemed to have settled back into their normal lives, walking the streets again without constantly looking over their shoulders. There'd been a memorial in the city, held at the largest temple three days ago. Many students had attended. Candles were lit, and the names of all those who had been lost were read aloud by priestesses of the Bloodmaiden. I hadn't gone, but Florence had told me about it. I couldn't go. Not without Blake.

Classes had resumed. Some of them had new instructors. Lysander Orphos, of all people, was now teaching Professor Allenvale's Botanical Alchemy classes. I knew Florence had mixed feelings about that: Allenvale had been her favorite instructor.

I walked by the greenhouse that morning to drop off a book Florence had forgotten in our room. I'd paused outside, unable to resist peeking in for a moment. Lysander stood behind the table at the head of the enclosed glass room, his long silver hair up in a practical bun. He'd been holding up a plant of some kind—Florence probably knew the name of it. I watched as he spoke to the class with calm, quiet confidence.

And that was when I'd realized it: We'd lost Allenvale, but her class would go on. Bloodwing would *not* close. Blightborns *would* be safe there—perhaps eventually, safer than they ever had been before. Lysander

standing there was a small rebellion in itself. It was an act of defiance. The students were listening to him, and there was hope in the air. Fragile but real.

And yet, except for that brief moment, I didn't feel hopeful for myself. I felt afraid. Panic was tight in my chest, and the feeling grew worse every day. Blake should have reached out. I should have felt something, shouldn't I? If Vorago had him—if Blake was truly bound and controlled—then this absence meant even less sense. Vorago was brutal, merciless. If he'd struck the city once, why wouldn't he strike it again? Surely he wouldn't just be content to hide away and starve.

Unless they were both already dead. Maybe Blake had forced Vorago back into human form and then …

What if Blake was already gone? What if he'd been dead for days, and I couldn't sense it or feel him because … there was nothing to sense? Nothing to feel? How long could I go on this way? Without Blake, I wasn't just lonely, I felt like I was missing half of myself. I couldn't bear the thought of him suffering and alone without me there to help him. It hurt so much I stumbled. And then realized I was walking to the wrong destination. Rodriguez's old office door loomed ahead.

"Shit," I cursed softly under my breath. I whirled around and headed back toward the main wing of the castle. I'd been summoned by our new headmaster. If Rodriguez had asked to see me, then that meant there was a problem. Probably with high-bloods. Probably with Elaria.

On the upside, Kage's grandmother, Elaria Avari, was not dead, but a more pessimistic person might see that as a downside. What a delightful thorn in Rodriguez's side she already was. She—or one of her many secretaries or servants—had been knocking on the headmaster's door daily, demanding that oversight of the school be returned. Elaria's daughter, Natsumi, had been a member of the Bloodwing board of directors. But Natsumi, Kage's mother, hadn't made it. Now Kage's grandmother wasn't wasting any time grieving. No, she was too busy demanding revenge.

Many people hadn't realized there had been two dragons over Veilmar that night. Once Rodriguez had figured it out, he'd made sure to keep it under wraps. He'd spread rumors (though, could they be called *rumors* when they were mostly the truth?) that Viktor Drakharrow had been the red dragon and that it was his fault Veilmar was now in rubble. Which was, well, mostly true.

So now Elaria wanted Viktor Drakharrow found and destroyed. Of course, eliminating Viktor would make her the most powerful highblood in the realm—we'd just be replacing one tyrant with another. Though, I'd admit Elaria didn't seem quite as bad. The bigger problem was that we had no idea in hell where Viktor was anyhow; otherwise, I was sure Rodriguez would have been only too happy to appease Kage's grandmother on that one.

As for establishing a new board composed entirely of highbloods for the sake of Sangratha's supposed stability? Well, she wasn't about to get her way there.

I reached the doors, thoughts of Elaria temporarily pushing aside the panic that was a constant buzz beneath my skin. Though, Blake's absence was a continual ache in my heart. I walked into the vestibule leading to the main office. Behind the desk where Silvio Santos had once sat during Regan's brief regime, there was now a petite dwarven girl. It took me a minute to recognize her. "Dani!"

The girl's eyes widened. Then she sprang to her feet, nearly knocking her chair over in excitement. "Medra! Professor—I mean, Headmaster Rodriguez told me you were coming in. I'm so happy to see you. I've been wanting to thank you for—" she said and colored "—for everything."

I stared at her, then smiled. "You look really good."

Dani's cheeks were pink and healthy. Her eyes were bright. The pallor she'd had a few weeks ago was gone. And she was back in First Year colors, gray and royal blue. "Yes, I'm improved, aren't I?" She smiled, showing adorable dimples.

"So you're … not a thrall anymore?" I said cautiously.

She shook her head. "No, not after what Headmaster Pansera did. House Mortis released their hold. My aunt got involved, too. Professor Stonefist is my aunt, you know. My greataunt."

"I didn't know that," I said, impressed. "She's a fantastic combat instructor."

"Yes." Dani shuffled awkwardly. "She didn't know what was going on last term. If she'd found out earlier, well … she would have stepped in." She flushed. "It was my first year. I was trying not to ask for any help. I wanted to show I was all right on my own, that I could be independent."

I thought of Naveen with a pang of guilt. He hadn't had Professor Stonefist for an aunt. If he had … would he still be alive now? "I

understand," I said softly. "I'm glad Regan was able to help and that you're safe." I gestured to the office. "So you work for the headmaster now?"

Dani nodded enthusiastically. "My aunt thought it might be best if I took a leave of absence from my studies. The headmaster agreed and approved it. Now I work in his office part-time." She touched a piece of paper on the desk. I noticed everything had been perfectly arranged. "Hopefully now I can enjoy more of my first year aboveground."

Considering there had just been a devastating dragon attack as well as a deadly plague, I wasn't so sure how normal the rest of Dani's first year was going to be. But I decided not to point that out. "So you came from a dwarven city?" I asked curiously. "What was that like?"

"I lived all my life underground. I'd always dreamed of coming to study on the surface." She looked eager to say more, but just then the door to the main office swung open.

A tall broad-shouldered young man emerged. I might have considered him handsome … if I hadn't happened to know he was a bloodthirsty sociopath.

Silvio Santos had made sure one of his first acts as House Mortis leader was barricading the doors of Bloodwing to desperate blightborn refugees fleeing Veilmar. Silvio was a true believer. He didn't just benefit from the hierarchical system. He embraced it and believed it was the natural order. So why had I let him live? Sometimes I wasn't sure. Maybe because I knew he was in some way Blake's kill; if I killed him, it would be like admitting Blake wasn't coming back. Or maybe it was because I was merciful—and because I knew Silvio Santos was not exceptional. If he fell, someone else would simply rise up to take his place, a Quinn or an Edward or a Larissa. Another Cade or a Lucian.

House Mortis still had supporters. Some students had chosen to remain in that house. But change was coming. Eventually, everyone would be forced to take a stand on one side or another. In the meantime, they still had time to make a choice. To change their minds. To choose a different path. Even Silvio Santos.

Of course, that didn't mean I had to play nice in the meantime. I crossed my arms and fixed my eyes on Silvio's. If he wanted to cross the room he'd have to detour. I watched his brown eyes narrow. A scowl crossed his golden face. He kept walking at the same pace. For a second it seemed like he might plow right into me. Then at the last second, he veered around and

marched out into the hall. I heard him laugh and turned to see him lightly punch a House Mortis boy in the shoulder. Then they walked off together.

"Ah, you're here already." Rodriguez stood in the doorway, looking harried. "Come in, Miss Pendragon." I followed him into the office. He leaned back against his desk with a sigh, then ran his fingers through his hair, leaving dark strands sticking up in various directions. "What a day."

"It's only noon. Trouble with Silvio Santos?" I said, closing the door behind me.

"With Silvio, with Elaria Avari, with every highblood left in Veilmar." He shrugged impishly. "You know, they've taken to calling me the Usurper."

I stared. "The Usurper? What, are you supposed to be Viktor's replacement or something?"

He laughed. "Close enough. I took a position meant for a high-blood, which apparently makes me as bad as a murderous despot in their books. I expect we'll see graffiti and pamphlets any day now." He gestured to the pile of correspondence stacked on the desk behind him. "My complaints pile. And this is just from today."

"At least it's tidy," I observed, eyeing the stack.

"Well, that was Dani," he said sheepishly. He touched a hand to his throat. "She's been encouraging me to wear a tie, too. Apparently ties lend you a greater air of authority."

I tried to picture Professor Stonefist wearing a tie and decided she didn't need one. I stared at the undone piece of fabric at Rodriguez's throat. "If she's going to insist then perhaps she should teach you how to tie it."

"Well, it was tied until Silvio arrived. Then I started pulling at it and now …" He gestured helplessly.

"Who tied it for you this morning, anyhow?"

"Oh, that was, uh, Sankara. He said he was pleased to see I was dressing the part." Rodriguez's ears turned just the slightest bit pink, and I smirked.

"Well, you clearly have Dani's and Sankara's support. What do you need me for?"

"Right." He cleared his throat. "Please take a seat, Miss Pendragon." He moved to sit behind the desk.

I raised my eyebrows but did as he said and sat down in one of the empty chairs. He leaned forward, steepling his fingers, his face more serious. "Oh no," I said.

"What?"

“I can read the signs. It’s one of *those* meetings, is it?”

He gave a nervous chuckle. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Just get to the point, Rodriguez. What’s the bad news?”

“Miss Pendragon … Medra, I mean,” he said, already wincing. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot and—”

“Never a good sign when someone says that.”

He ignored me. “Look, I think … we need to accept the fact that Blake isn’t coming back.”

I stood up. “Is that it? The answer is *no*.” I started walking toward the door.

“Please hear me out.”

I turned around. “Absolutely not. How did you even arrive at that idiotic conclusion?” His mouth opened, then closed. “That’s what I thought,” I said furiously. “What else aren’t you telling me? There’s something, right?”

“That’s unfair,” he said weakly.

I folded my arms. “I don’t think it is. Are we really going to do this again? Do you remember the last time? Nothing good comes from keeping secrets from me.”

Rodriguez exhaled heavily. “Fine. Yes. All right.” Then he leaned down, his upper half disappearing behind the desk completely for a moment. I heard the sound of something heavy being dragged, and then he straightened up and dumped a stack of ancient-looking books onto the desk with a thud, followed by several brittle, tattered scrolls tied with faded cords.

“Old books? Also not a good sign. You have got to be kidding me with this shit, Rodriguez.”

He grimaced. “Look, the reason every one of these books and scrolls is here is because they all contain the same thing.”

“Not another godsdamned prophecy.”

He looked at me with genuine sympathy—and true regret. “They have those in the world you’re from, too, do they?”

“Yes, they fucking do.” I could feel myself starting to tremble with rage.

Rodriguez sighed. “You’ve been the subject of one before, then?”

I nodded, tightly.

“Then, you can probably understand—guess—why I didn’t want to tell you about this before.”

I stepped closer to the desk, my eyes blazing. “What does it say, and how long have you known it existed?” He hesitated. “How long, Rodriguez?”

“Since before you arrived. Long before I met you.” He held up his hands. “Look, let me explain. This prophecy has existed for hundreds of years. The Emberwatch—”

“Not the fucking Emberwatch, too,” I said with disgust.

“They have played a pivotal role in protecting Sangratha.”

“Yes, yes, and you’re the very last sorry member of the club,” I scoffed. “Forgive me if I’m not impressed by the absolutely idiotic stunt you pulled in the name of the Emberwatch the last time.”

“On the positive side, you might say the Emberwatch is the only reason Miss Shen is still standing,” he reminded me.

I sighed. “I suppose that’s fair. Besides, they’re almost extinct, aren’t they?” I eyed him. “You are the only member, isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” he agreed quickly. He rubbed his chin. “Although I was hoping to add another.”

My eyes widened. “Who? Me?”

He nodded. “Sharing this prophecy with you—well, let’s just say it’s like an automatic acceptance letter. Of course, you’ll need to abide by the code.”

“Code? I don’t want to join your stupid secret society,” I grumbled. “You can’t tell me what the prophecy says unless you swear me to secrecy first, is that it? What is there, a password? A special handshake?”

Rodriguez’s ears were pink again. “A handshake,” he said sheepishly. “And a password.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I exploded, throwing up my hands. “Teach me the handshake and tell me the password later. But tell me the prophecy *now* or I will walk out that door.”

“Fine.” He licked his lips. “There’s a little bit of backstory that’s customary to share first.”

I sank back into the chair across from him and put my head in my hands.

“It won’t take long,” he said quickly. “But it’s rather essential.”

I clenched my jaw. “Fine.”

“Great. I’ll get right to it.” He forced a smile. “Don’t worry, there won’t be a quiz.”

I glared at him.

“Right, right,” he said hastily. “So you’ve heard the story of the Bloodmaiden before?”

“She was basically the first highblood, and the other highbloods think she saved the world. Yes, I’ve heard of her, Rodriguez. I may be from another world, but I haven’t been living under a rock.”

“She’s important to this story.” He took a deep breath. “You see, there’s another version. The true one.”

I rolled my eyes. “How do I know it’s true?”

“What?” He looked confused.

“How do I know what you’re about to tell me is any more true than what the highbloods claim to be true?” I leaned forward. “Just because we’re the good team and they’re the bad team?”

“That’s a very oversimplified way of putting it. But, basically, yes.”

I sighed. I could mess around and argue with him for fun, but then this would take even longer. “Fine. Proceed.”

Rodriguez stood up and started to pace. I got the feeling he was wishing the room had a blackboard. “Very well. You already know the official story. In the midst of a great famine, the Bloodmaiden saved her family, nourishing them with her special blood, and raising up a new race.” He paused dramatically. “But what the story leaves out is that this all took place long before the Veil existed.”

That got my attention. “What does that mean, exactly?”

He shrugged. “The stories vary but it means that once Sangratha was once part of a larger world. And in this world, people like yourself were much more common.”

I stared at him. “People who were fae, you mean.”

He nodded. “The word *fae* is not always used, but yes, on that the texts agree. There may or may not have been a famine—some texts simply suggest the Bloodmaiden was an ambitious young fae woman who was experimenting with ways to reach immortality.”

Fae were already extremely long-lived so that just seemed greedy to me, though not surprising.

“In any case, the Bloodmaiden’s people—the fae—were horrified by the way in which she had saved her family using her own blood.”

“They were also probably a little annoyed by the fact that her family now wanted to feed on them,” I pointed out.

“Well, yes, fair point. Anyhow, she gathered together all those she had saved—”

“Her little highblood cult.”

“And she led this group of her followers and family to a distant land where they continued to reproduce. Time passed and eventually the new race was hardly recognizable as fae at all.”

I stared at him. “Wait a second, Rodriguez. Are you saying all highbloods used to be fae?”

“Essentially, yes. Of course, riders come from an offshoot of mixed fae and blightborn bloodlines. Another breed entirely, one might say.”

“Un-fucking-believable,” I breathed. Wait until Blake heard this. He’d already told me about what he’d learned from Viktor’s journals in the Black Keep. Then I grimaced, wondering if I’d ever get to tell him. I wondered if Orcades already knew.

“This would have been fine,” Rodriguez continued, “except the other fae decided this new offshoot could not be allowed to continue. They readied themselves to fight a great battle against the Bloodmaiden and her followers. But the Bloodmaiden, knowing her people were far too few to fight, used her terrible sorcery—”

I snorted. “Not that I want to defend the highbloods, but this story rather demonizes female ambition, doesn’t it?”

“She used her terrible sorcery,” Rodriguez continued, ignoring me, “and broke Sangratha off from the rest of the fae realm.”

“Aercanum,” I supplied. “It’s called Aercanum.” Unless there was another fae realm we didn’t know about. At that point, I wouldn’t have been surprised by anything.

“May I continue?”

I waved.

“Thank you. She broke Sangratha off from the rest of the main realm using powerful blood magic created from sacrificing her own triad and their children.”

I stared. “Ruthless bitch.”

“Indeed.”

I frowned. “So the Bloodmaiden created the Veil?”

Rodriguez hemmed and hawed. “That’s the implication, though none of the texts are particularly clear.”

“And where do I fit into all this?”

“Yes, that.” He picked up one of the scrolls on top of the pile. “Well, that leads us to the Prophecy of the Pure Maiden.”

My jaw dropped. “Is that seriously what they called it?”

He looked awkward. “Well, *pure* most likely refers to someone who is pure of heart.”

“Thank the gods for that,” I snapped. “Because if they’d meant something else by it, that ship has sailed.”

He squirmed. “Understood.”

I leaned back. “Go on with your stupid purity prophecy.”

“Prophecy of the Pure Maiden,” he corrected. “Look, I’ll just read it aloud, shall I?” He carefully unfurled the scroll. “Now, this is just one version. But they all say basically the same thing, with minor textual differences. We have to account for changes in dialect over time and scribal error. Why, scribal errors alone account for …”

He started to drone on in that scholarly way that was all too familiar to me after being in his class, and my eyes started to glaze over. “Rodriguez,” I snapped. He paused, wearing a faintly guilty expression. “Get on with it,” I said from between gritted teeth.

“Right. I forgot you are not as fascinated by scholarly endeavors as your friend, Miss Shen.”

“No, I am certainly not.” No point in denying it.

He looked down at the scroll, cleared his throat, and began to read. *“As the Veil grows thin, she shall approach: the woman who has crossed over and stood against the darkness.”*

I shifted in my chair. Fuck. That part did sound a little bit like me.

Rodriguez looked at me with an expression that could only be described as smug. *“Thrice defiant and thrice bound by blood, she walks where others cannot tread. In her hands lies the fate of many realms, for the Veil shall be sustained by her dying or undone by her living. The world may not endure nor the tyrant be defeated should she refuse the call.”*

I clenched my jaw. Rodriguez watched me. “Is that it?” I demanded.

He nodded.

“And you think it refers to me?”

“Well, the part about a woman who has crossed over.”

I scoffed. “Crossed over what, though—a bridge? That could mean anything.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Didn’t you say you had fought a rather monumental battle against evil back in your own world?”

I scowled. “It was big enough. But *stood against darkness*? That’s pretty vague. You could say the average person stands against darkness every time

they light a lamp."

Rodriguez frowned. "Miss Pendragon, this prophecy was considered important enough that the Emberwatch guarded it with their lives, kept it a secret for generations, and recopied it faithfully. I sincerely doubt they were referring to lamps." He carefully rolled the scroll back up. "Now, the part about being *thrice defiant* is less clear."

I rolled my eyes. "Exactly. I think a case could be made for more than *thrice*."

"Perhaps. But *thrice bound by blood* … Well, that seems pretty obvious to me."

"Does it?"

"Of course." He looked eager, as if he'd been secretly dying to talk about his crazy conspiracy theory with someone else and was finally getting a chance. "You were bound to Blake. Then to Nyxaris. And then the third instance—well, the way I see it there are multiple possibilities. You were bound to your mother, weren't you? And then one might argue you were again bound to Blake in dragon form. Plus, the use of your blood to raise Molindra." He started to scribble notes on the pad of paper in front of him.

"I'm not bound to Molindra, though," I pointed out.

"Well, not that we know of. But if there's truth to that story about your mother's soul transferring into Molindra …"

I ignored his implication. "And the prophecy doesn't say *more than thrice*, it only says *thrice*."

He rubbed his nose. "Well, there is always a little bit of textual ambiguity in these ancient—"

I stood up. "But there's never any ambiguity about someone having to die, is there, Rodriguez? There's always a death involved."

His face fell. "Well …"

I headed toward the door.

"Medra, where are you going?"

I stopped and looked back. "How does this change anything? Why would this mean I can't help Blake?"

He looked a little shocked. "Surely you see that you're too valuable now. You can't risk your life."

I tilted my head back and laughed. "You think I'll die saving Blake? But if I died, wouldn't that mean the prophecy was wrong and it wasn't about me?" He looked as if that thought hadn't occurred to him. I sighed. "Look,

Rodriguez. Maybe the prophecy is about me, and maybe it's not. But either way, I'm going to help Blake. And some words on a moldy old scroll aren't going to stop me." I paused. "If those words really are about me, then don't worry, I'll do it. I'll save the fucking world—again—if I have to."

He had the decency to look shamefaced.

"But in the meantime, saving Blake comes first. Then the world. In that order." I turned around and stormed out before he could say anything else that would make me want to punch him in the face more than I already did.

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CHAPTER 12

MEDRA



I don’t even remember deciding to go to sleep that night. I don’t remember getting ready or saying good-night to Florence. But a few hours later, I lay in bed, the blankets pulled up under my chin, with Florence breathing softly in the bed across the room. I turned onto my side, trying to relax, but I couldn’t calm down. Not after what Rodriguez had said. My mind raced. The words of another prophecy crowding in.

Born of power, in endless night,
To cast down realms, a dark birthright.
Both fae and mortals, their thrones shall swirl,
In the child’s hands lies the end of the world.

I’d done what the prophecy had said. I’d cast down a realm. I’d tried to save everyone. But what if I hadn’t? What if the world I’d left hadn’t been saved—what if it had simply ended? For all I knew, the sky had split open behind me and everyone I’d loved had died screaming while I escaped to this new life. What if Aercanum was already gone?

I flipped onto my other side, staring at the shadowed tower window. In the distance, I could hear water lapping at the shore. But tonight, even the sound of the sea wasn’t enough to relax me. I thought of my aunt, Morgan, fierce and full of power. My uncle, Draven, who had cradled me in his arms. Hawl, the warrior with the gentle eyes. Were any of them still alive? Had the world ended without my even knowing?

I’d tried. I’d made the choice, paid the price. I’d never even been allowed to know if it had been enough. And now here I was—again. In another world with a different fucking prophecy. The unfairness of it all pressed down on me. My eyes burned. I hadn’t asked for any of this.

My thoughts drifted to Blake, to the way he must feel right now, tangled together with Vorago. How the weight of the things he had done while he wasn't fully himself must be pressing down, threatening to suffocate him. I imagined the guilt he must be feeling, the way the blood of innocents that stained his hands must be eating him alive.

I had known that kind of despair. I had known that loneliness before. I, too, had wanted to die, thinking it was the only way out. And now I couldn't even tell Blake any of this. But I could find him. I could keep going. I could make him my reason for being. Not another prophecy, not the fate of the world, not destiny—Blake.

My breathing finally slowed. Gradually, sleep crept over me. I fell asleep thinking of Blake. Remembering his face, his touch, the sound of his voice. I woke up in the Bonewood.

Around me trees swayed in the night. I walked through the shadows, sensing a wrongness to the woods. The farther I walked, the more decay I saw. The tree branches were bare, and their bark peeled away in long strips. The woods were dead, but they were not at rest. I walked into an open grove. The ground was covered with fragments of bone and dipped a little. There at the center crouched a dragon: Molindra.

Scales that once shone gold were now blackened and stained. Dark veins pulsed and crawled beneath her hide. She was feeding, the half-devoured carcass of a deer lay between her foreclaws. Her jaw moved slowly, mechanically, devoid of pleasure.

My breath caught as I spied the heavy iron chains that bound the Luminthar's hind legs. And as I took another step closer, I saw the marks on her back. Long welts had been ripped through the dragon's scales, as if made with some terrible whip.

Who would flog a dragon? Rage flared in my chest.

No matter what Molindra had done, she didn't deserve this. She'd been brought back against her will. Turned into this creature of darkness.

Terrible, isn't it? The voice was familiar. Orcades. *We could break the chains, of course*. I could practically hear her shrug. *But what would be the point*?

The point? Wouldn't the point be to be free? My heart sped up. *Do it. Break the chains, and fly away with Molindra. I don't understand why you haven't before.*

We won't leave the girl.

The girl? Understanding dawned. *You mean Lunaya?*

Yes, Lunaya. We are bound to the girl, and the girl—

Is bound to them, I finished for her. *Fuck*.

My mother didn't tell me not to use foul language. She just sighed. *Fuck, indeed.*

Orcades, I said, a little shocked.

Enough about me, my mother said, changing the subject. *How have you been? Still alive. But then, I knew that already*.

Been checking up on me, have you?

I manage to peek in. But rarely to get your attention like this.

I felt a pang of guilt. *I didn't know you'd been trying to.*

You don't always dream the same way. Our minds aren't always in tune with one another, let's say.

But tonight they are. I'm glad. I've been wanting to talk to you, too, I told her.

How delightful. It's nice to be wanted, and Molindra and I are nothing if not nice. Aren't we, my dark, dead darling?

Yes, I said slowly. *Is she really … dead?*

Undead. We prefer the term necrotic. *It's more elegant.*

But she's eating, I pointed out.

She doesn't need to, but I encourage her to eat. It gives her a little more energy. Then she requires less for a while from … other sources.

From Lunaya, I said, trying to hide my horror. I understood, though I really didn't. I didn't understand how any of this worked, and I didn't really want to. *How are Marcus and Catherine?*

Extremely distracted, my mother said, sounding cheerful. *There's been a bit of a pause to our demolition efforts*.

So they aren't trying to tear down the Veil? There's been a break in the plague, I told her. *Far fewer new infections. It's almost like it's stopping*.

Oh, no, they're still trying, she admitted. *But they've found a new way to go about it. It's bound to be not very nice*.

My heart sank. *Right.* I hesitated, then, *Mother, when you brought me to this world, did you know there was another prophecy? Involving me?*

I certainly did not, she said, sounding indignant. *What utter rubbish. Why, we've already—*

I know, I know, I said tiredly. I watched Molindra rip apart the deer carcass. *Did you know when you brought us here that this world would turn*

out to be connected to Aercanum?

I did not, she said reflectively, *or I would have carried you elsewhere. Somewhere far, far away. But as I've told you, I had little control over our destination. We were like a top, spinning out of control. I touched the top with my finger and … voilà. Here we are*.

Here we are, I echoed. I thought of all Rodriguez had said and hardened my heart a little. *Still*, I said, *you must have known some of this before, about the Bloodmaiden. About who she really was*.

There was no reply.

Mother?

I'm here.

Surely you must have known, I prodded, *that the Bloodmaiden was fae. That our worlds were once connected*.

It may shock you, my dear, but your mother does not in fact know everything under the sun.

I bit my lip. *Fine. So you didn't know about the Bloodmaiden or the prophecy or the Veil or any of this before we got here.*

That's right, she said, sounding tired. *Though, none of it is very surprising. I suppose it's ironic, isn't it? I truly thought we had traveled quite far. After all, the journey seemed so long …*

My heart sped up. *So long? What do you mean? The journey didn't seem long at all to me. One moment I was, well, dying, and the next I was waking up.*

A long pause.

Orcades, I said warningly, *what did you do*?

When two souls occupy one body, she said, *the boundaries between them can blur. Often, the host risks losing their own sense of self entirely. This magic is therefore rarely practiced—and for good reason.*

My blood ran cold. It was a recitation. I recognized the words. *Those aren't your words, Orcades.* Professor Wispwood had once said them.

But they are fitting. And quite true. She paused. *I've already explained to you that I made some unintentional changes.*

Changes to me.

Yes, changes to you, she hedged.

Like the Classical Sangrathan, I remembered. I'd had no knowledge of it before arriving in Sangratha. But now I was fluent. *You said there was seepage, between us, between our skills and experiences*.

Yes.

But they were unintentional changes, weren't they, Orcades? I demanded.

Mostly …

Mother!

You were only a child. No more than a girl. When you arrived here, I made sure you were a woman—albeit a young one.

My heart was pounding. *Orcades, what did you do?*

I lent you some of myself. Some of my memories. Some of my experiences. I gave them to you. Just a few. Just enough to … make you more whole.

More whole? Was I not whole before?

Silence.

My heart fell. *I've always known I was a freak,* I said bitterly. In Aercanum the children would mock me. I was unnaturally quick. Unnaturally strong. Even adults were afraid of me.

I tried to give you something to round you out, she said sounding, for the first time in all our conversations, a little desperate. *You were a precocious child*.

I grew unnaturally quickly, you mean. Like some sort of monstrosity.

Not a monstrosity. Her voice was firm, even angry. *You are my child. My daughter. The love of my life. I wanted to help you. To ensure that when you landed, wherever you landed, you would feel … more prepared. More complete.*

What memories did you give me? Which ones, exactly?

The memories that any young woman might have. I filled in some gaps. I gave you a few extra years of experience, of life.

Years? I gaped. *You what? You donated years?*

I have lived for a very long time, she pointed out. *I have countless experiences. I suppose at the time it seemed selfish to keep them all for myself when you had so few*.

I thought of my first kiss. The first boy I'd slept with. Parties I'd snuck out to and attended. Had any of it been real?

There is a part of me that wonders, Orcades said, her voice very small, *if we were pulled to this world. Perhaps I did not stop the top after all. Perhaps it was sheer hubris to think I had anything to do with this. Perhaps something wished for us to stop here*.

I suddenly felt afraid.

And that makes me terribly concerned for you, dear heart. The thing about prophecies is they always seem to have an awful way of coming true —no matter how you try to avoid them.

Yes, I said, with a lump in my throat, *I've found that to be the case as well.*

Your fae powers, she whispered. *In Aercanum, you were so strong. But here …*

Here I had no elemental powers. I had my rider's physique. I had whatever Blake's blood had done to me. That was all.

I worry that while you grew weak on the voyage, I took something from you that I did not intend to take.

My powers?

I could feel her nod. *I worry that in my great need to survive, I stripped them from you. And now that is why I find myself … so …*

You're not easy to kill, I said softly. *And I'm glad for that, Mother .No matter how you got that way.*

Yes, well.

There was an awkward silence.

Now, as for all that is going on here. This terrible mess with Molindra and Lunaya, she said, her voice picking up speed. *The Veil Guardian has not fallen. There is still time yet. But with this other muck with the dwarves and their dragons—*

The dwarves? I exclaimed. *What about the dwarves?*

Oh, Marcus and Catherine are up to something. They could not bring the Veil down with Molindra and me alone. They've seemed to realize their error and are searching for some work-around.

What does that have to do with dwarves? The dwarves don't have dragons, do they? How could they underground?

I'm not entirely sure. You know, I don't know much about dwarves. But I feel quite certain dwarves were mentioned. I could hear the fatigue in her voice. *I believe Lunaya overheard something, in fact.*

I felt a pang of guilt. *How is Lunaya? Is there no way to bring her back?*

The poor girl longs to return to you all. But she is bound here, her life sewn like a thread to her triad.

Pretty fucked-up triad, even for highbloods, I remarked.

Yes, she's trapped in an unnatural marriage. My great fear is that things will become worse for her.

So there's no way to save her? No way to save you? I demanded.

Focus on stopping Marcus and Catherine. But not alone. Not just you. You have your friends, you have Blake?

She sounded so anxious and frightened for me that I hastened to reassure her. *Yes, I have friends. I have others to help me.*

Good, I don't want you to come near here. Stay a thousand miles away. Or more.

I can't help from a thousand miles away, I pointed out. *Things are a mess here at Bloodwing and in the city. We're recovering from the plague and from Blake's dragon attack …*

She gasped. *Dragon attack?*

It's a long story, I said hastily. *But Blake … Don't worry, he'll be all right*. Why was it so much easier to lie to her than to myself? She was quiet for a moment. *Orcades*?

Yes?

If the Veil falls, what then? My voice was small in my ears. *Will it … destroy worlds? This one? Both of them?*

A long pause. Then, *I don't know, my love. But I have no wish to find out.*

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CHAPTER 13

REGAN



I was dreaming of home. Not Bloodwing. This was the large and sprawling manor house I'd grown up in when I was young. Located along the eastern coast of Sangratha, I'd lived there until I was twelve. After that I was sent to a private academy for girls—but I still returned home every summer. Once I graduated from the girls' school, then came Bloodwing, of course.

The lush cream carpets were thick beneath my feet as I walked down the hall. My mother had complained she was tired of Drakharrow colors—all that oppressive red and black. She'd re-decorated that spring, insisting on a lighter palette of golds and creams. My father had accused her of sleeping with someone from House Orphos, and she'd called him insane. Father's other consort had defended her. They'd all fought. A lot.

I only knew this because Persis had told me as soon as I'd returned home. I'd reassured him, told him that our parents' triad was forever. That they'd made vows in the temple. So no matter how much Father might not like Mother's redecorating, Persis needn't worry. They were our family.

I was sixteen and beautiful, and I thought I knew everything back then. I thought being a highblood meant I would always be safe and protected.

In the dream, I drifted down the hall. Raised voices carried into the hall from a half-open door.

"I don't care if that's what the history book says," a high-pitched boy's voice whined. "It's stupid, Amina."

I walked toward the sound, peeking through a doorway into a room that had been set up as Persis's classroom. My brother sat behind a desk, his legs swinging, his face flushed with indignation.

Standing at the front of the room by a blackboard, looking down her hawkish nose with an exceedingly disapproving expression, was his tutor, Amina Hassan. I hid a smile. Amina had been my tutor before I'd left for school. Now she'd been assigned to instruct Persis. I knew my parents approved of her methods, even though I'd noticed she was harsher with Persis than she'd ever been with me.

I watched as Amina tapped her cane along the floor and moved toward Persis's desk. She'd always been a stern woman. She might have married and had her own family, but she'd rejected all offers, deeming them unworthy of her. I knew she preferred life in a highblood family—believing the company she kept here and the lifestyle both superior to any life she might have had with her fellow blightborns. The other house staff disliked her. Amina didn't care. Mother said Amina was goddesssent, the perfect instructor in all ways and an ideal example of blightborn humility.

"Superiority is not a curse, nor is it cruelty," she now told Persis impatiently. "It is simply the divinely ordained order of the world."

"I don't want to be superior," Persis said, crossing his arms and trying to stand firm. "Being superior is stupid. We should all be the same."

Amina narrowed her eyes and tapped her cane against his desk. "I believe you are misunderstanding the nature of the lesson I am teaching you, young Master Pansera. Highblood superiority is not a request. It may not be rejected. It is your birthright."

"I don't care," Persis said stubbornly. "I don't want to rule over anyone. The blightborn aren't inferior to us. That's a lie. Look at you—you're a blightborn. You're smarter than me, Amina."

The yardstick swept down, smacking Persis's exposed hands.

He yelped, then started to cry. "Why did you do that?" he wailed. "I was paying you a compliment."

I pushed open the door. Persis caught sight of me and slid out of his chair, running over and wrapping his arms around my knees. I put my hand on his head, my gaze lifting to Amina. I shrugged apologetically. She gave a terse nod.

"Come now, Persis, you're being very rude to your tutor," I said gently, trying to turn him around to face Hassan. "She's simply reminding you of what every highblood child already knows and accepts. Why, you go to the temple just as I do, Persis. Don't you remember what the priestesses tell us?"

“The blightborn serve,” my little brother mumbled quietly.

I nodded encouragingly. “That’s right. They serve and we lead. It’s for their own good.” I looked down at him. “Now, what’s gotten into you today?”

Persis hesitated, then blurted out, “Shanny’s father fixes ships, and she’s smarter than Papa. And she’s smarter than me at lots of things, like sums and figures. And she’s blightborn. So …” he said and scrunched up his little face “ … so it doesn’t make any sense.”

Shanny. I tried to place the name. Then I remembered her—the housekeeper’s daughter. She was just a little older than Persis, a wild, noisy thing. Just the sort of friend Persis would be fascinated by. Amina shot me a knowing look; I made a mental note to speak to my mother. Persis should be playing with other children of high birth, not blightborn servant girls with an undeserved sense of arrogance.

But now wasn’t the time to say this to my brother.

“Persis,” I said with the utmost gentleness, “it’s not about being smarter, or who is better at sums.”

“Then, what is it?”

I searched for the words I’d been given, the ones that had always sounded so convincing. “It’s our divine responsibility,” I said firmly. “Our blood carries power. That means we must lead, even when it may be uncomfortable for us.” I touched his cheek. “You’re a very modest boy. But you’re a Pansera, and you’re a highblood. That means you were made to do great things. And Shanny—”

“Why not make the girl your thrall, Persis?” Amina broke in, her eyes bright and calculating.

“That would solve that problem,” I muttered. Thralls were much more compliant.

Persis looked horrified. “But I don’t want to feed from Shanny, I just want to play with her. We have other thralls.”

I sighed. “Very well. But you have to understand the world as it is, Persis. Not as you wish it would be. Accepting our place in it doesn’t make us cruel. It would be cruel not to lead the blightborn. They worship us. They wish to be led. They look up to us. How lost without us they all would be!”

Persis still looked unconvinced. His mouth twisted a little, but he nodded —because I was his older sister and he trusted me.

The room blurred. How had I been such a fool? My words rang in my ears. I could taste them now and they were bitter. How had I dared to teach my brother such awful lies? Because I had been taught the same, as a child. And I had believed it all too easily. Arrogance and cruelty had come more naturally to me than to Persis.

The dream was thinning. Persis was slipping away. I reached out, trying to hold onto my little brother. "Persis!"

But he was gone. I was drifting again, floating away from the memory.

Regan. A man's voice brushed my mind.

Not Viktor. Not Kage.

Regan, the voice repeated.

I frowned. I didn't recognize the voice. But it was deep, and though persistent, the tone was gentle.

Where are you?

Who are you? Is this real?

It's real. I'm real. The voice became a little more urgent. *I've been trying to reach you, but he has you carefully shielded.*

Who has me shielded? Shielded from what? I asked crossly. Vaguely I began to realize I was in a great deal of pain. The dream had blocked the pain out. Now it was starting to come back. *Who are you?*

I believe you've been given medicines to suppress the pain you must be in. Also ones to keep you from waking up and to stop you from dreaming.

But I just had a dream, I insisted. *I was with Persis*.

Persis. That's your little brother, isn't it? The medicine must be wearing off. You'll soon wake up.

That explained the pain that was swiftly returning. I groaned, trying to find some sense of my body. I couldn't move. I couldn't see.

Where are you? Can you tell me anything about the place you are? Who is with you?

Where am I? My heart lurched. *I'm here with you* … Confusion tangled my thoughts. *Persis. I* … My mind felt thick and water-logged. *I don't know where I am*.

All right, I want you to take it slowly. Go gently, the man's voice cautioned. *Very carefully, try to open your eyes. I expect it will hurt a bit. What do you see?*

I fought to clear my vision, to pull my eyelids apart. Just for a second, long enough to see …

I cried out as pain detonated.

Regan! The man's tone had turned strange. It was tinged with pain. But why? I was the one screaming.

Another rush of pain slammed through me all at once, coming back with a crash. My chest was an open wound filled with agony. My back arched off a table as another scream tore from my throat.

"Hold her!" a man's voice shouted. His was familiar—the healer Viktor had argued with. "Hold her down, she mustn't move. Not until I've concluded the tests."

Hands grabbed me. I thrashed my body, my muscles clenching in protest. I tried to force my eyes open again. The room spun in a blur of light. A woman's face suddenly loomed over me, her expression strained as she forced my arm down and strapped it to the table. I looked up at her. Briefly, our eyes met. Her breath hitched. Her face was familiar; I knew her. But the thought flew away before I could place her face. My vision swam.

Another figure leaned into my field of view, another woman. She wasn't struggling to tie me down. She merely observed, her expression cool.

Recognition cut through the pain. Memory rushed back. Kage as a wolf. The Peacebringer's Hill. We'd been in Veilmar. Where was I now?

The woman's eyes traced my body with detached curiosity. "When do you think we can complete the ritual?"

I tried to scream again, tried to call back the voice that had been in my head, to ask for help.

"My tests weren't conclusive. We can't risk it until I've conducted further assessments. If she dies, we'll lose our chance completely. He'll be furious. We need to put her back under," a male voice said, sounding frantic.

I felt a sting in my arm like a tiny insect's bite. The world tilted violently, and a dreamless darkness fell.

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CHAPTER 14

FLORENCE



The Vale was loud and warm in a cozy and chaotic way that was comforting despite the crowd of people. I'd claimed a small table near one of the windows that looked out over the water. I pushed my chair back against the stone wall, my legs crossed and a book carefully balanced against my gray-and-black tweed skirt. Neville slept at my feet, his tail curled around him like a huge fluffy blanket. Some students walked past my table but didn't even realize he was there. Neville had always been like that. When he wanted to be noticed, you noticed him. But when he wished, he could make himself almost … well, not invisible exactly, but he could choose not to be observed.

A blueberry tart sat neglected on my plate, still warm from the oven. I picked it up and took an absent-minded nibble, my attention fixed on my book. It was a romance novel, of course. A beautifully written, whimsical one. In the chapter I'd just finished, tiny dragons no larger than cats roasted apples that tasted like true love. The entire scene was adorable. As the heroine bit into an apple, I wondered what exactly true love tasted like—apparently the key was dragon fire. I thought of asking Nyxaris to roast an apple for me, but I suspected if I asked and then told him why, he would laugh until he choked.

The thought of his deep, rumbling laugh sent a warm flutter spiraling through my chest and heat to my cheeks. I glanced around, but no one was sitting close enough to notice me. Still, I tugged my cardigan closer as if it might hide the evidence of my thoughts.

I still hadn't told Medra, not because Nyxaris had forbidden it—he hadn't specifically told me I couldn't—but I didn't feel as if I had the right. Not when Medra looked so weary and miserable all the time. Not when Blake

was still missing and her heart was, well, breaking. How could I tell her the most wonderful thing was happening to me when she was barely holding herself together?

No. Maybe afterward. After we'd found Blake.

My eyes drifted back to the page and to those two magical words, *true love*. My traitorous thoughts slid back to that night on the beach. To Nyxaris's body pressed up against mine, holding me as if I were something beautiful and fragile, something he treasured but which terrified him at the same time. My fingers tightened on the book, my cheeks burning now. I fumbled, trying to turn to the next page, and Nyxaris was suddenly there growling inside my head. Not with warmth or desire but with pain.

What is it? Nyxaris, what's wrong? I asked in alarm.

A horrible moan. *The Dragon Court.*

I'm on my way.

I was already moving. My chair scraped as I stood up, the novel vanishing into my bag. Neville was on his feet, his huge, pointed ears perked up and alert. The fluffin followed at my heels as I left the scone abandoned on the plate, pushed my way through a growing crowd of students lined up at the counter and wove between tables. Once out in the corridor, I broke into a run, satchel slung over my shoulder, my skirt gathered in my hands. Neville kept pace easily, a little flicker of gold and orange skimming across the ground.

As I burst into the Dragon Court, my lungs were burning. Nyxaris was already there in his Duskdrake form. He sat silent and still in the precise spot that his statue had once stood. I caught my breath. To anyone else, he might have looked like true stone again. Carved from shadows, his obsidian scales hardly caught the daylight.

He wasn't looking at me but across the courtyard. I followed his gaze—and stopped dead.

Where the statue of Alabryss, the House Mortis dragon, had once stood, all smooth white marble, there was now nothing but ruin. The alabaster stone was ash and powder, scattered across the ground like the remnants of a funeral pyre. A chunk of sculpted wing lay shattered on the ground, its edges fused and glassy.

I looked up, scanning the skies. Dragon fire—the air still smelled faintly of it. *Who did this, Nyxaris? Viktor or … ?*

Vorago. The name dragged out of his chest like a wound torn open. *This was Vorago.*

My stomach dropped. *Blake was just here?* I stepped toward him, my boots crunching over the grit. *Why would he do this?*

Not Blake. Vorago, Nyxaris corrected. *Why? To hurt me and to punish her.*

Is there nothing we can do for Alabryss?

The time for that has come and gone. I have failed her.

My breath hitched: A dragon had been killed here. Just moments ago. An enchanted dragon, certainly, but one who might have lived, might have flown again—just like Nyxaris. Or like Molindra.

I was a coward. I hesitated. I did not ask to bring her back. I feared what could go wrong. I made no attempts. I did not wish to risk you. Now it is too late. Nyxaris's voice was full of anguish. *I should have tried, should have demanded it of you all. Instead, I wavered. Uncertain as to whether …*

Whether she might awaken like Molindra? I whispered. Nyxaris said nothing. I stared at the sky. The sun had gone behind the clouds. *This means Blake—Vorago—he was close. He was at Bloodwing.*

Nyxaris inclined his head grimly.

I looked over at him, realizing something else. *You're not entirely surprised.*

Another silence.

You knew where he was, I pressed. *You knew and you didn't tell us*?

In answer, Nyxaris opened his mouth and roared. I stumbled backward. A student who had been strolling through the cloisters briefly glanced our way and then began to run the opposite direction.

Nyxaris looked down at me, his amber eyes burning. *I have been guarding you. Guarding this school. Guarding your city. I believed Vorago understood the consequences that would befall him should he venture here again. I believed he would not dare.*

But he has dared, I said softly.

Desperation has rotted his reason. Revenge lies heavy upon him. He blames me—and Molindra. A century of stone. A hundred years of silent fury. Molindra is beyond his reach. And so he struck Alabryss instead, hoping to wound me, to enrage me.

There was no point in saying that it seemed to have worked. *He wants to draw you out,* I said, the words clicking into place. I forced myself to

breathe. *All right,* I said carefully. *Tell me this. Do you know where Vorago has been hiding?* My dragon hesitated. Something in my chest twisted.

Yes, he said at last. *He skulks in a burned-out village half a day's flight from Veilmar*.

My control snapped. *You knew all this time, and you didn't tell us?* I went on, as anger surged. *Medra has been suffering. Do you have any idea what she's going through? Wondering if Blake was alive, wondering if he was …* I stopped. *Is he alive?*

Nyxaris's gaze sharpened. *He is.* The *for now* didn't have to be spoken.

Relief crashed over me. *How? It's been more than two weeks since he last fed from Medra.* It was strange that I knew that—it seemed too intimate. But it was a fact she had shared with Rodriguez and me. *How can he survive this long without her blood?*

As long as Vorago remains in dragon form, the hunger will not be as strong. He is weaker, yes, fraying at the edges. But he could survive a few more weeks yet. Perhaps longer. Dragons are hardy.

I stared at him. *So he can't survive forever. He might have died before this. You had no right to keep this to yourself. I deserved to know. Medra deserved to know. You don't get to decide what truths we can handle.* Nyxaris's wings flared outward, and another roar tore from his throat, vibrating through my bones. I flinched. People all over the school must have heard it and trembled. *Stop. You'll scare them.*

Scare them? Let the sheep be frightened. There is a wolf among them, he growled. *Make no mistake about it. I was protecting you.*

Protecting me?

Yes, he roared. *Protecting all of you*.

I took a step back. *By killing Blake. By letting him die slowly. Vorago would have come for Medra, wouldn't he? But you made sure he couldn't get to her.*

His eyes flared. *I have been protecting her, too. You, this school, your precious city.* His huge black frame shuddered. *You do not understand. That night, when we fought him in the skies, Vorago spoke to me.*

I held still. *What did he say?*

He laughed at me. Taunted me. He told me what he would do when he got to you. How he would make you pay for what I had done to him.

I froze.

He swore he would make you suffer—and make me watch.

Silence fell between us. I held very still, thinking.

I could not risk him drawing closer, Nyxaris said, his voice trembling. *I could not allow him to come near you.*

My anger didn't vanish, but it shifted. *You should have told me. You should have trusted me. We're in this together.*

I am trying. Nyxaris lowered his head. *But what I feel for you … what binds me to you is not gentle, Fireheart. This bond would have me be vigilant. I wish to stand guard between you and the world itself.*

You can't be a wall between me and everything that would harm me, I whispered.

He gave a mirthless laugh. *Why can I not?*

Because … I thought. *Because it's impossible. That's what my mother tried to do, isn't it? That's not what I need from you.*

He was quiet for a moment. *No?*

I shook my head. *No. I just need you to love me.*

His breath shuddered, and I sensed him on the verge of laughter. *I do love you. I have tried not to. I have utterly failed.*

I swallowed. *I think I fell in love with you before I even understood what you were.*

You are my Fireheart. You are the flame I would end the world to keep burning.

My throat tightened. *I don't need you to end the world. I need you to help me save it. And save Blake.* This wasn't how I'd imagined us having this conversation. I'd assumed Nyxaris would be … well, not a dragon. But it didn't matter. I meant the words, no matter what his form was. *You're afraid to lose me*, I said softly. *But if I don't help Medra …*

He was quiet. *Then, you wouldn't be you.*

I nodded. *We have to help her.* I paused. *At least, I do. I can't make you do anything. I won't even try.*

I will help you.

I'd known he'd say it. Still, my heart warmed to hear the words. *What Vorago has done is terrible. But now he'll expect you to strike back.*

I looked down at the fluffin sitting quietly beside me. *You once told me Neville staked two claims, one in you and one in Blake, even after he knew about Vorago.*

Nyxaris looked down at the fluffin. *Yes.*

Then he's not beyond our help, I said firmly. *Not if Neville believes he isn't.*

The fluffin made a chirping noise.

Nyxaris growled crossly. *Ridiculous*.

It's not ridiculous, and you know it. I started to feel a little excited. *Vorago wants to draw you out. But we want to draw* him *out. We can use that to our advantage.*

Use you as bait, you mean, Nyxaris said coldly. *You will not be on my back when I see him next*.

But I'll have to be, I said firmly. *That's what is sure to bring him out. I have to be on your back. But we won't be alone. Listen …*

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CHAPTER 15

BLAKE



I swam through an ocean of memories. Time was meaningless where I was. I clutched fragments of myself, surfacing and sputtering as I struggled and fought against being subsumed in the essence of another.

There. A beach. My mother's face. I reached out my hand … and felt sand. I was nearly nineteen, home from school for the summer. The next year I'd be heading to Bloodwing. The sand was warm beneath my bare feet. The sun was high. Gulls cried overhead. It was the second month of summer, but the day was a cooler one. A gust of wind blew in from the water, tousling my hair.

My mother walked by my side, her arm looped through mine. Desdemona Drakharrow was barefoot like me. She wore a long loose white gown with a tattered black knit sweater pulled over it to shield her from the breeze. I'd given her that sweater as a gift for one of her birthdays long ago. I must have only been four or five then. She'd kept it and still wore it. My mother's fair hair fell in long waves down her back. She looked peaceful and younger than usual. I knew it was from being at the beach, away from city life and the strains of highblood society. The tension that seemed to always fill her face when we were in the city was gone, softened by the sun and the sea.

Ahead of us, two children ran and played—Aenia and a little boy, Persis Pansera. The Panseras had a house near the beach next to ours, though ours was only opened up in the summers. Aenia loved spending time here. She and Persis could go months without seeing one another, only to quickly resume being the best of friends after a few hours at the beach.

I realized my mother was frowning. "Aenia," she called loudly. "No throwing sand! Persis, that means you, too. Friends don't throw sand in

their friends' faces."

I snorted. "I mean, I seem to remember Regan throwing a lot of sand at me when we were their age."

"Yes, well, you gave as well as you got," my mother said placidly.

"Did I?" I tried to remember.

My mother shot me a look of amusement. "You don't remember pushing Regan's head under the water and making her scream?"

I laughed. "Me? Come now, I'd never be such a brute."

My mother shook her head. Her expression turned soft, and she raised a hand to touch my cheek. "You are my gentle boy. My sweet Blake. But there is a roughness in you, too. You have your father's strength, make no mistake. When you were younger, I had to teach you how to curb it."

I looked down at her. It was still hard to believe that over the last two summers I'd shot up and now surpassed her in height. She'd always seemed larger than life, an unchanging presence, calm and steadfast. Now I saw the worry in her eyes. I felt a pang of guilt. "You look tired."

She brushed off my concern. "I'm fine. I've been sleeping better here than I have in months."

Persis was screaming bloody murder again. We watched Aenia laugh loudly. Then she went over to him and seemed to apologize for whatever she'd done. They ran off together again. I exhaled in relief. Sometimes my little sister could be a little lacking in empathy. It was one thing to show proper highblood competitiveness and another to be constantly cruel, especially to a fellow noble child.

"She's all right," my mother reassured me. "They're little. They're still learning to care about other people. It's normal, Blake. I promise you. You and Regan were the same way." She squeezed my arm. "Remember when her pet died that summer? She was so brokenhearted."

"Brokenhearted? Regan?" I scoffed. "Are we talking about the same girl? I seem to remember she forgot to feed it. You know, that's why it died."

"Oh, Blake! She cried for a week. Did she forget to feed it? Well, she'd never had a pet before. Her father had never allowed her one."

"Yes, and then you said they should let her keep a kitten. She kept it in her closet and forgot about it." Had Regan been sorry? I tried to remember the look of horror on her face and failed. But then, she was a highblood. We tended to hide our mistakes when they happened.

My mother's face turned pale, and I regretted my words. "Oh, the poor girl."

I snorted again. "You've always been too soft on her. I've never understood why."

My mother's eyes suddenly blazed. "When something like that happens, Blake, it says more about the parents than the child, I assure you." Her face fell abruptly.

I knew what she was thinking about: Marcus. I glanced ahead at Aenia. "I'm sorry, Mother."

She bit her lip. "Someday, you may have children of your own, and you'll understand …" Then she trailed off, remembering.

Ahead of us, Persis shrieked again. "I'm telling!" the boy cried this time. Then he scampered off up the sandy cliffs and back to the house. I watched Aenia kick at the sand with a scowl on her face. Then she gave a shrug and began to play in the water by herself.

"Oh, I hope he doesn't go to his father," my mother murmured.

Lyle Pansera didn't like Aenia. None of the Panseras really did, besides Persis—when Aenia wasn't throwing sand in his face, of course.

"Marcus fucks up plenty. But I have, too," I said shortly. I couldn't get my mind off the look I'd seen in my mother's eyes. "I made your life harder."

"It's my job," she said shortly. "I'm your mother. It's my job to protect you. To protect all of you."

"You already had your work cut out for you with Marcus," I muttered, kicking at a rock.

I didn't have to look at her to picture her weary expression. "Yes, well, Marcus …"

My older brother was a lost cause. I knew this. But I knew my mother still carried some hope in her heart for him—even when he'd been the cause of Aenia's plight. The reason she'd first been orphaned.

It had been five years now. Aenia was less than two when I'd found her. Marcus brought me out with his friends for the first time that night. They'd taken me out to a tavern where they'd made me drink too much and where they'd made a nuisance of themselves. I'd puked in an alley and wanted to go home, but Marcus made me stay. They'd gone to another tavern, gotten more drunk, and then spilled out into the street, noisy and drunk and wild. They'd been so wild they'd scared me.

It had been a simple coincidence that brought them to Aenia's door. Her mother had gone out to fetch some medicine for Aenia's older brother. At least, that's what I'd guessed had happened, when I was putting the pieces together, afterward. There'd been a bottle of cough medicine in her mother's hand still when …

Marcus and his friend had liked the look of Aenia's mother: She was a pretty blightborn woman. Maybe she'd made the mistake of smiling back at them, but it didn't really matter. No matter what she'd done, she hadn't deserved what happened to her.

They'd followed her home. They'd stayed.

I'd known Marcus was wild. I knew he didn't like to listen to my father's dictates. He'd always looked up to my uncle, Viktor, our father's older brother and his right hand. But Viktor had always scared me. Now Marcus was scaring me badly, too. He and one of his friends had swept into Aenia's family's little cottage. Maybe all would have been well if Aenia's father hadn't been home. But he was and he'd tried to protect his wife, to stop a highblood from feeding. Even from outside, I'd been able to hear Marcus laughing. He'd said it was their right to feed whenever and wherever they wanted—and from whomever they pleased. Aenia's father had been defiant, so they'd slaughtered him. Then they'd fed in a pent-up frenzy.

I stood out in the street, shaking with fear and not knowing what to do. Knowing if I went into the house, my brother might kill me, too, for trying to stop him. But when a baby began to wail from inside the house, that was the last straw. I'd gone inside.

I'd been far too late. Aenia's father lay sprawled in one corner. Her mother lay in a bed, her blood soaking the sheets as her lifeless eyes stared upward. And there lay Marcus, passed out blood-drunk beside her corpse. As for Aenia's brother … Well, I never liked to think about what they'd done to him.

Aenia was in a crib. She must have slept through the worst of it. Then she'd woken up and when her mother hadn't come to pick her up, she'd started to scream. Marcus was still sleeping through it. But his asshole friend had stumbled over to the crib. I watched in horror as he leaned over the girl, his fangs bared greedily. He was still hungry. Still wanting more. Not caring who he hurt to get it.

I couldn't take it. I'd … snapped.

I was only fourteen. I'd never killed anyone before. Certainly not another highblood. But when I left that house with Aenia cradled in my arms, I was a killer of my own kind.

I didn't wait for Marcus to wake up. I ran.

My mother's hand squeezed mine. "Blake."

I forced a smile. "Sorry. I was just thinking."

"About your sister?"

My sister. Thank the Bloodmaiden for my mother. I'd gone straight to her, confessed what I'd done. She hadn't scolded me. She hadn't turned me in. She'd shielded me, though it had cost her a great deal—her place in society, friendships, time with me. Time she could have spent trying to redeem Marcus, wasted though that would have been.

She'd listened to me tell her what I'd done, and then she'd quickly made arrangements. She took Aenia away to a distant Drakharrow estate and sent me back to school that very night. She'd stayed away for more than a year, and when she'd returned, she and my father had announced the birth of their daughter, Aenia Drakharrow. Aenia was three then, but she was small for her age, even for a blight-born child. I'd always wonder if that was from what had happened to her. If the trauma had stunted her growth. Or maybe she'd have always been small, who was to say.

In any case, it was a wild, unbelievable story. But my mother had forced everyone to accept it. My father had supported her. His word was law, even then. So then everyone had to get in line. Even if deep down they might have wondered about the truth.

Marcus never said a word. He never berated me about the death of his friend. He'd hid the body. The truth had never come back to find me. He'd done that for me I guess because I was his younger brother. You might say it was the only good thing he'd ever done—and calling it *good* was a huge fucking overstatement, considering he'd helped me cover up a murder. Even if his asshole friend had deserved it. Even if he'd been a murderer, too. We were all murderers.

I looked at my mother. Except her. I couldn't believe Desdemona Drakharrow had ever hurt anyone in her life. Except maybe with words. She was an intelligent, astute woman, and when she wanted to, her words could be biting. But kill? No, she wasn't a killer. She'd helped my father forge a new path, one in which highbloods cultivated a new way of

restraint. Marcus's frenzied feeding was the old highblood way, one he and my uncle still relished.

I looked ahead at Aenia, still splashing in the water; she didn't care how cold it was. I'd heard her nurse fight with her before and knew it was a miracle she'd been willing to put clothes on today at all. Still, her very existence put my life at risk. My mother's, too.

"Did I do the right thing?" The words spilled out, and as soon as I'd said them I regretted it. I was no boy to look for false reassurance. I was a man now, and I needed to stand by what I'd done. It was time for me to protect my mother, not the other way around. But I couldn't take the words back.

"You know it was." My mother's voice was firm. "You've always known."

"But I put us in danger. Even now, there are whispers. If anyone ever finds out …"

"There will always be whispers. People will always whisper about what they don't understand. Anything that frightens them." She looked at me, her eyes soft. "Especially love." She took my face between her hands, her skin warm against my cheeks. She waited until I met her gaze. "Listen to me, Blake. Never regret being merciful."

I gave a scornful laugh. "That's not what Uncle Viktor would say. He'd say I'd been weak. That I'd jeopardized our family."

"True," she agreed. "But Viktor is wrong. Your uncle doesn't understand some of the most important things in this world. Your choice was compassion. Your sister's life is a gift, and so is the love she shows us every day. You gave her a second chance. Never, ever regret that." She kissed my forehead and smiled. "You gave me a gift as well. I'd always wanted a daughter." Her hands dropped away as new voices carried toward us down the beach. We weren't alone anymore. Two men were coming down a path that led to the beach.

As they reached the sand, they began to walk side by side toward us. My father was on the right. Alexander Drakharrow cut an imposing figure. Tall and powerfully built, his long legs took great strides along the sand. His thick pale blond hair was short and neatly trimmed. He wasn't dressed for the beach. He still wore a long coat that billowed in the breeze. He must have just arrived from Veilmar. He looked ahead at us and lifted a hand in greeting. The Drakharrow gray of his eyes was lighter than mine, almost silver. Those eyes missed very little.

Just like his brother’s red ones.

Viktor Drakharrow followed beside my father, moving with a little less urgency, his steps unhurried. His hands were clasped behind his back, and he was scowling—as he often was. Viktor was far older than my father. His face was lined and shaped with cruelty. For as long as I’d known him, his eyes had been that deep, unsettling red. My mother said red eyes were a sign of a very long-lived highblood. I’d never seen another highblood with red eyes, so Viktor must have been long-lived indeed.

I felt my shoulders tighten as they came nearer. Then my father smiled and reached out a hand to ruffle my hair. “Missing school yet?”

I shook my head and grinned at him, the tension in my shoulders dissipating a little. “I think I’ll stay here all year. Live at the beach.”

My uncle snorted. My father’s presence was a balm while my uncle’s was a burden. “Soft living is a luxury. One Drakharrows cannot afford.”

“We can afford a great deal,” my mother said softly. She stepped forward and kissed my father’s cheek. “Welcome back.”

I watched them with a sense of happiness and comfort. Everyone knew they were a love match. They were a pair, not a triad. Their alliance had been chosen, not brokered. Even years later, people gossiped about how my mother had received many offers. How my father had waited, stubbornly, until the girl who had been his childhood friend had finally given in and said yes.

They’d stood together before I was born, as civil war swept through Sangratha, nearly tearing the realm apart. My father had negotiated peace and risen to become Sangratha’s new regent. He’d restored order, ended the war. The realm adored him. As a result, my family had always been the target of scrutiny. I’d grown up with the attention, but I’d never felt comfortable with it. Our words were dissected, our clothes and our friendships whispered over in salons and great halls. Every smile my mother gave, everything Marcus or Aenia or I did … It was all something the realm felt entitled to judge—or, worse, print stories about.

You’d think having a son like Marcus would have spelled trouble for a father who’d been labeled a Peacebringer, but to highbloods, Marcus’s wild behavior was more natural than the new way of restraint that my father preached. The realm loved Marcus. Newspapers and periodicals printed stories about his exploits, speculating over his clothes, his friends, who he was fucking. My mother had told me that when I started attending

Bloodwing, I'd be facing much the same thing. I'd been sheltered in the small private boys' academy I'd been attending, and my privacy had been protected there. But at Bloodwing, more would be expected of me.

My father turned to my mother. "I hope we're not interrupting anything."

"Never," my mother replied lightly. "Just a little mother–son talk."

My uncle eyed me like a hawk. "Blake had better get used to a less indulgent existence that doesn't involve his mother leading him everywhere by the hand."

My mother bristled, but my father just laughed. "I don't recall my time at the academy being uncomfortable. Quite the opposite."

"There is nothing soft about this family," my mother said coolly.

My uncle ignored her, his eyes still on me. "You'll learn soon enough. That school your mother has you at is hardly a fitting place for a Drakharrow, a little country academy where the gentry send their boys. Bloodwing is different. That academy is a proving ground. Next year you'll be surrounded by the best youth in Sangratha from only the noblest houses. Their heirs will test you, challenge you, leap on weakness the moment you show it."

My jaw tightened. "I don't intend to embarrass our family when I attend Bloodwing, Uncle."

I glanced at my mother—but she wasn't looking at me. And then I saw it. There in her eyes, for just a heartbeat.

Fear.

It passed over her so quickly she'd almost managed to hide it. My father was smiling down at her. His hand had settled at her waist in a familiar, possessive way, and he was murmuring something softly that was meant only for her. She smiled perfectly in response. But it was too late. I'd seen the look in her eyes when she'd looked up at him.

My chest clenched. I idolized my father. I'd grown up believing him to be the best highblood in the world, the man who could end wars and bring peace. The man my mother truly adored. So why was the fear there? Why did she hide it, buried like a seed, beneath the performance of her affection? I stared at my father, hardly noticing my uncle's gaze as it slid to mine.

I'd always feared Viktor; that was nothing new. But now for the first time, I wondered what my father the Peacebringer was really capable of. Something my mother had once said to Aenia and me now came back to me as a chill went down my spine. "Righteous men are the most dangerous.

They care nothing for blood on their hands if a goddess can wash it off again.”

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CHAPTER 16

MEDRA



I visited Professor Wispwood's class once. She told us a story about a highblood who had forcibly bound his soul to a mortal mage. The mage found a way to separate their souls using a forbidden ritual." I paused. "It worked. Sort of."

Visha's brows lifted. "Define *sort of*."

"The vampire was destroyed. The mage survived but her mind was shattered. She lived the rest of her days in madness."

The silence that followed felt heavy. I looked down at the object lying between the three of us on the floor. On the face of things, it was far too small and insignificant for what it really represented. Which was, of course, life and death.

"Are we insane to be trying another blood ritual?" I finally asked.

When Theo spoke there was, for once, no humor in his voice when he said, "Completely."

"That's not reassuring."

"No," he agreed, his voice mild. "But neither is waiting for Blake to starve to death or for Vorago to do something else truly awful."

I flinched at the dragon's name. After today, I hoped I'd never have to hear it again.

Theo tilted his head slightly. "Didn't Professor Wispwood also tell you that you'd failed her magic tests?" I nodded. "And yet," he went on, "you woke a cursed dragon. And transferred your mother's soul to a dagger. You survived the Consort Games. You survived Blake nearly …" He cleared his throat and looked awkward. "Well, nearly killing you."

"That was probably all because of Orcades," I pointed out. "She never lost her powers. Or because of Blake's blood. Not because of me."

Theo didn’t look convinced. “Maybe. Or something is blocking your abilities. Something you’ve buried. Or suppressed.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“Could your mother have wanted you to think you’d lost your powers when you arrived in Sangratha? Not erased them—just hidden them? Even from yourself?”

“What reason could she possibly have for that? I still stood out like a sore thumb.” No, Orcades hadn’t taken my powers away on purpose, she had used them up to save herself. But I didn’t want to tell my friends that. I wasn’t sure they’d understand. Because in the end, I didn’t blame Orcades for what she’d done. I was simply grateful to have had her in my life.

“I don’t know …” Theo took a deep breath. “Maybe because sometimes the safest thing is for a powerful person to believe that they aren’t one.”

I thought Theo was off base, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a little truth to what he’d said. The words sank in deep, and I hadn’t even told them about Rodriguez’s little prophecy.

Visha leaned back against the chaise she was sprawled on. Even during dark-magic rituals, she looked surprisingly casual. “He’s saying it has to be your blood we use for this. Not mine. I mean, are we really surprised?”

“Blake’s blood, your own powers, or your mother’s.” He shook his head. “Either way, there’s something about you, Medra.”

I threw up my hands. “Fine. As long as you’re sure.”

“Look, I’m the resident sanguimancy expert, aren’t I?”

I knew Theo was trying to joke. But no one cracked a smile. “I trust you. I just don’t trust that this will go well. And if we fail …”

“If we fail, Blake is dead,” Visha said bluntly. She eyed me. “Among other possibilities.”

“But he already is if we do nothing,” Theo said quietly.

I inhaled slowly, picturing Blake’s face in my mind. His mouth, smirking slowly. His crooked nose, perfectly imperfect. The way his hand felt holding mine. The way he said my name—not Medra, but Pendragon. I’d grown used to it. He’d made it his own. Whatever happened, whatever the cost, it was worth it. I nodded. “Right. You’re right. I know this. Let’s do it.”

Theo sat down on the floor cross-legged. I sank down across from him. Visha stayed where she was, the critical observer. “Here goes,” Theo said. He rolled up his sleeves.

A few minutes later, I studied the dagger Theo and I had just performed a dark blood-magic ritual over. “How do we know if it worked?”

“We won’t. Not until you, you know …” Theo tried to shrug nonchalantly but I saw the worry in his eyes. “But I’ll be there every step of the way.”

Visha pushed her chair back. “As will I. Now can we stop dawdling and get out of here?” She looked at the clock on the wall. “I’d rather be early to a confrontation with a dragon than late, if you don’t mind.”

Panic sprang up in me again, sharp and unrelenting. “What if he doesn’t come? What if he’s too weak to fly? What if—”

Visha cut me off, already opening the door. “This isn’t the time for *what if*s. This is when we act. This is when we take the battle to Vorago. Now, are you coming or not?”

I grabbed the object from the floor; it felt cold against my palm. I hoped I wasn’t accidentally infecting it with my doubt and fear. All of this could be for nothing. But Theo really did look confident, so that was something. And Visha … well, she always looked skeptical.

I shoved my own nagging doubt aside and carefully placed the item in a heavily stuffed backpack, then slung the bag over my shoulders. Theo was already out in the hall, crossbow in his hand. His angular face was resolute.

“I’m coming,” I said, reaching for my own weapon propped by the door. “Let’s go.”

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CHAPTER 17

BLAKE



I drifted in and out of consciousness. When I did surface, it was always in old memories.

I found myself in a drawing room. Someone had lit tall scented candles and drawn the curtains, even though it was still daylight outside. A blightborn servant moved through the room, quietly clearing away cups and plates of half-eaten food and drink and straightening chairs.

I only had to catch a whiff of the candles for the memory to come streaming back in full. I knew this day: It was one of the worst days of my life. The day after my father's death.

I sat on a velvet sofa with Aenia curled up beside me. We were at one of the Drakharrow estates just outside Veilmar. Every so often, Aenia's small body would shake with sobs. But she wasn't crying for our father. She was crying because Mother was gone.

I watched the servant tidy up, doing what people in the great houses always did after a death: pretend that order could fill the void.

The day before, in a single moment, everything had changed. Mother, Aenia, and I had been together in the same drawing room, seated around a table playing a game of cards, when Viktor had unexpectedly arrived. We'd watched from the window as he'd jumped out of his carriage, surrounded by guards, and marched into the house. My mother's hands had tightened around the cards she'd been holding as my uncle entered. He delivered the news with a coldness that, in hindsight, I shouldn't have found surprising, telling us how Father had been found dead in the Black Keep that morning. It was suicide, my uncle had announced. The family would know the truth. But to the public, he would tell a different story. Highbloods didn't often die

so young from natural causes. But this would have to be an exception. No doubt Viktor would be painting it as a terrible tragedy.

"Blake," Aenia asked for the hundredth time that day. "Is Mama sick?"

I closed my eyes. "No, I don't think so."

"Will she die? Like Father?"

I stroked her hair. "Not for a very, very long time."

"If she's not sick, why did she leave? Where did she go?"

I pulled her a little closer. "You know where she went," I said, trying to keep my voice light and to hide how much fear I was feeling. "Uncle Viktor took her to the temple. She's helping the priestesses prepare for the funeral."

But the memory wouldn't leave me. Viktor's hand at my mother's elbow, polite but firm. The guards that had flanked her as they escorted her out of the house and back to the carriage. Just before the carriage door closed, Mother had looked back up at the drawing room windows. She must have known Aenia and I would be standing there.

"She didn't even say goodbye," Aenia whispered.

She hadn't had time. Viktor had told us the news and then declared that my mother was needed at the temple. Something had passed between them. I still didn't understand what it was. But now Mother was gone. I had the terrible feeling she wasn't coming back.

The doors to the drawing room swung open, and Marcus strode in. He eyed the maid, and she quickly scooped up her tray of dirty dishes and hurried from the room. Our servants knew to avoid Marcus. My older brother looked unchanged by grief. His clothes were clean and neat, his hair freshly brushed. His expression was so bright that it made my stomach churn. He tossed a newspaper my way. I didn't catch it, just let it land on the floor by my feet.

He rolled his eyes. "It's done. Viktor was confirmed as Sangratha's new regent this morning."

At first, I didn't understand. "What?"

Marcus crossed the room and poured himself a drink at the side table. He tossed it back, then sank down into an armchair, spreading his legs out in front of him. He looked as if it were just another day, not the day after our father had died. "The regency. Viktor will take Father's place and represent House Drakharrow." He looked smug. "In the city, the bells are already tolling. Banners are being hung from every corner. The temple is already

swarmed with blightborn.” He yawned and put the glass down. “Viktor’s announced that the entire realm should prepare for a full month of mourning.”

That part made sense to me; of course the realm would mourn for our father.

“Viktor didn’t waste any time,” I said with disgust. “This couldn’t have waited a few days?”

Marcus shrugged. “Why wait? We all knew it had to be him.”

I frowned. “Did we?”

He laughed. “Of course. Who else would it be? Who else would rise in Father’s stead but Viktor—you? Me?” He snorted, then walked back over to the side table to pour himself another drink.

“There’s always Mother,” I said coldly. “Or have you forgotten about her?”

Marcus’s back was to me, but I saw his hand pause. “Ridiculous. Mother wouldn’t want that kind of responsibility.”

“Why don’t we call her back here and ask her?” I suggested. “You know she hasn’t come home all night.”

Marcus turned slowly and leaned back against the table. “I’m aware. Viktor told me. Mother wants to spend some time in the Sanctum.” He eyed Aenia. “You’d better get that through to the brat.”

I looked down at my little sister. Aenia had fallen asleep; otherwise, no doubt she’d have lunged for Marcus. She hated being called that. “Aren’t you worried about her?” I asked him quietly.

He shook his head. “’Course not. Viktor knows what he’s doing.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said heatedly. “What’s that got to do with Mother being at the temple?”

He hesitated. “Look, I know you’re mourning Father but …”

“But what?”

“But the truth is, he made us all look weak,” Marcus burst out. “He let the other houses think they were our equals. He let blight-borns forget their place. Viktor always carried the real weight. Now it’s time he gets his due.”

“Father shaped the realm. He rebuilt it. He brought peace and unity.”

Marcus shrugged. “Look where that got him.”

The room seemed to swirl.

I swallowed. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Marcus frowned. “Look, Blake, Viktor is regent now. Accept it and be grateful. Viktor is strong. With him at the helm, House Drakharrow will rise higher than it ever has. If you’re smart you’ll stop clinging to Father’s ghost and toe the line.” He slammed down the glass and started toward the door. “Real highbloods take what they want. They don’t fucking ask for permission.”

The room vanished, Aenia’s soft weight disappearing like a mist. She and Marcus and the house were gone. In their place was something vast and red and wrong. I was trapped inside a predator. *Vorago.*

An all-consuming rage, hot and corrosive, was my only constant. I wasn’t in him—not exactly. And he wasn’t in me. We were layered. Overwritten like old scrolls of text.

I wondered if this was what soul-binding felt like or what the dragons had felt like when they’d been turned to stone. Like drowning while still alive. Like being sealed away in a cave while the world outside kept moving. My soul was like a drop of ink in blood: still there, coloring everything, but not free. My own dragon was still alive. Burned down to a kernel of existence, but still somehow *there*. We were trapped together in this horror, both of us flattened and silent. Waiting.

Perhaps that was the only mercy, knowing I wasn’t completely alone in this fucking hell. But what company to be trapped with. My self … but not myself. The self I’d rejected. The self I’d try to kill. There was no point in thinking about it now. What I should have done differently. All that mattered—all that would ever matter—was her.

I thought back, trying to decipher how many days had passed by since the last time I’d been this aware. At first, I’d been conscious of everything. The beat of wings. The feel of the air. I’d known where we were. I’d known when Vorago fed and when he felt hunger. Now I barely noticed the outside world at all. Days blurred together, indistinct. I was only alert now because of the ache. It never eased. Instead, it was growing stronger. A nagging, endless hunger that persisted no matter how much Vorago gorged himself on meat. We didn’t need meat to survive. We needed her. *Her blood.*

Vorago knew it, too. I could feel him souring with desperation. He craved her—but not as I did. He craved her like a starving rabid beast that would devour prey whole. Vorago didn’t long for her voice, her form, her defiant spirit; he merely wanted access to her blood. The sustenance he believed she owed us—and thus him. But I would rather waste away and die than let

him have that. I clung to that reminder like a shard of glass embedded in my palm. Let Vorago starve. Let him rot. I would not be the instrument that brought him to Medra.

He'd already tried to reach her more than once. Each time, Nyxaris had barred his way—and I'd been glad. I knew it was not Medra that Nyxaris was truly protecting. No, the Duskdrake was guarding his new rider, Florence. He'd done a decent job of it.

Only once had Vorago seized a chance. Nyxaris had been gone, probably out hunting and distracted. Vorago had flown to the Dragon Court. I could remember the sensation of fire pouring out of a throat mine and not mine. Feeling Vorago's sense of satisfaction as ancient stone melted and shattered. And then the near miss as Nyxaris had unexpectedly appeared. Vorago had fled. We had escaped, barely. Since then, the red dragon had been unraveling.

Every day without Medra's blood stripped something from me—but I took comfort in knowing that however weak I grew, Vorago was not far behind. There was a sense of thinning. A loss of coherence. I knew Vorago felt it, too. We were starving together. Maybe I should have pleaded, begged to shift back to a man, asked for my body back. The truth was, I'd already tried that back at the beginning. My rage only amused Vorago; my pleading entertained him. So I'd gone quiet. Shrunk in on myself. Now I was exactly what Vorago expected me to be: a defeated captive. Broken and obedient. I'd withdrawn my thoughts as much as I'd learned how. Hoped Vorago would forget that I was even there. Because this was a fucking waiting game. Except I wasn't waiting to survive—I was waiting to strike. I would be the attacker from inside the city walls. The knife already lodged in the ribs.

I did not need to live myself. I wasn't asking for that. I only needed two things to die happy: Vorago dead and Pendragon safe. Nothing else mattered.

So I figured I had a chance—a slim one, very slim. After all, Blake Drakharrow had always been pretty good at burning everything down and fucking things up.

Days of agony and despair went by. Days filled with nothing but stillness and the gnawing hunger that I could not quell. Finally, Vorago stirred. His massive body shifted. Then scented something carried on the wind: dragon blood. And not just any dragon. Nyxaris's blood.

Vorago’s excitement spread through him like wildfire. I could feel his eagerness to strike at an alreadywounded prey. He’d tear Nyxaris from the sky and feast on his rider’s entrails. The Inferni rose, forcing weary wings to beat, driving himself up and outward with brutal determination. I felt it all. His hunger. His hope.

This was it, the opening I’d been waiting for. I’d find a way. I’d burn it down. Burn us both down from the inside out.

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CHAPTER 18

FLORENCE



The wind tore past me, clean and sharp and salty. I shifted a little on Nyxaris's back. My usual skirt and cardigan were gone. I wore lightweight leather armor, supple and made for easy movement. My hair wasn't whipping around my face like it was the first time I'd flown on dragonback; I knew better now and had it back in two tight braids. I touched one, looking down at the long black tresses now crisscrossed with dark blue streaks. They were hardly noticeable to others. But I was still shocked every time I saw them in the mirror, another fae trait I'd gained from Medra. Lunaya's crossbow rested in my hands, strapped securely across my body. Bolts coated with Godsbane and emberfern were strapped to my left thigh in a leather bandolier case. I was prepared. Better equipped than last time. Still …

Are you ready? Nyxaris's voice was sharp.

I … think so.

You think so?

No, I'm not ready. I'm terrified. The words came out in a rush. *Maybe we should reschedule.*

Reschedule? Nyxaris snorted. *This is not one of your classes or a paper for which you may request an extension.*

I never ask for extensions, I exclaimed, offended. *I manage my time carefully*.

Florence, Nyxaris said, his voice gentler, *you are prepared, more so than last time. You have done this before*.

I took a deep breath. It was beautiful up here. Below, Blood-wing was a splash of red on an isle of green and brown, contrasting with the dark blue of the sea. Spring had softened the school's sharp edges, coating it with

green vines and encircling it in blades of grass. Nyxaris banked and soared lower, his wings cutting through the air with a steady thundering sound. I leaned with the motion, my body curving against his massive frame. I did it automatically, without thinking, without fear. My thighs were locked tight so I wouldn't slip. My expertise still surprised me. Not long ago, every flight had left me shaking and sore, muscles screaming, joints stiff for days. I'd bruised easily. But every day since that night in the Dragon Court, that night when Rodriguez had given me that mixture of blood—both Nyxaris's and Medra's—my body had been changing. Evolving. My fingers were longer now. Not so long that anyone noticed at first glance, but they held a crossbow more easily. My balance had changed, too. Even my pointed ears caught the rush of sounds differently as we flew, heightened to noises that once had been lost on the wind. My endurance had improved. My strength was still modest, but greater than it had been.

None of these things had come gently. There had been nights I'd barely slept. My joints had throbbed as if they were being pulled, stretched, reshaped. The last few weeks, I'd wondered if Blake had felt something similar. Had it been painful to metamorphose into a dragon?

You are allowing the anxious thoughts to overwhelm you again, Nyxaris chided. *I can feel them growing inside you*.

I'm still not good enough. Not for something like this. I bit my lip. *And if we fail, Medra will—*

You are not permitted to doubt your own competence.

I'm about to shoot another dragon while riding a dragon. I'd thought saying the words aloud might help. But they didn't. A wave of nausea swept over me. *Oh, Bloodmaiden. I think I'm going to be sick.*

You are not going to be sick. Nyxaris's words were a command. *You have done the same thing before, under worse conditions.*

Briefly, I shut my eyes. Remembering the city on fire. The screams and the smoke. *Yes, well, I was terrified then, too.*

Yet you prevailed.

Actually, I missed. Many times, I reminded him. *And you weren't bleeding the last time*.

Bleeding on purpose does not count.

My mouth twitched.

Besides, he went on, *you are not alone. The others lie in wait below us*.

I looked down as he flew lower over the school. Along the shore, hidden behind a cluster of rocks, Medra crouched, waiting—a crossbow braced in front of her, and at her feet sat a small creature. Neville's eyes were wide and watchful as he looked up at the skies.

That morning, I'd expected him to try to follow me and insist on coming along for another dragon ride. But it was like he'd read our minds: He knew what we needed him to do, where we needed him to go. He'd followed Medra out of our room without hesitation, trotting along behind her as she went to meet up with Theo and Visha.

The little creature is wise beyond his years, mused Nyxaris.

Yes, and he keeps almost as many secrets as Rodriguez, I muttered. I scanned again and found Theo farther along the beach, kneeling behind another low outcrop of stone. His angular face was grim, but his crossbow looked steady in his slender hands.

Visha was the farthest off. She wasn't hiding behind a rock, rather standing up and stretching, bouncing on her heels. Her face was hard and dangerous. Her crossbow sat on a nearby boulder, but she looked more than ready.

Everyone was in position. We had plenty of time. Nyxaris had calculated there was no way Vorago would arrive within an hour. I tried to calm myself. Then I felt my dragon tense, scale-covered muscles going rigid.

What is it?

Far across the horizon, a slash of red ripped across the sky.

My heart slammed against my chest. *He's early.*

Nyxaris's wings shifted, the beat changing just a fraction. *Yes.*

Vorago's massive crimson form soared toward us, wings flaring, scales catching the sunlight. Somewhere inside, was Blake lurking? Fighting to get out?

Maybe Blake is in control, I whispered hopefully. Nyxaris made a scoffing sound. I sighed. No chance of that, then. My Duskdrake banked lazily, then began to circle the school as if simply flying on a routine patrol. He made it seem so casual, yet my stomach was in knots. I couldn't help glancing back and noticing Vorago closing the distance. Nyxaris pretended not to see him. He was doing a good job, too. Suddenly he went rigid beneath me.

What is it? I gasped. His wings seemed to tighten. A chill went through me. *He's speaking to you, isn't he? What is he saying?*

Nyxaris didn’t reply. I couldn’t hear the words, but I felt their impact. I sensed the dragon’s anger spike and his control begin to strain.

He’s seen me, I guessed. Nyxaris didn’t answer.

But of course he had. Vorago was close enough now to spot my shape against Nyxaris’s back. I suddenly felt very exposed, and I knew what Vorago wanted: to tear me apart slowly, publicly, while Nyxaris was forced to watch. I forced the thought away, focusing on my hands on the crossbow. That wasn’t happening. Nyxaris would protect me from anything.

Get ready, Nyxaris said, his voice fierce. He turned sharply from Bloodwing, flying out over open water, leading the other dragon away deliberately. His wings beat harder, faster.

Focus now, Fireheart, Nyxaris commanded. *This is it.*

I swiveled around, turning myself backward as Nyxaris flew, bracing the crossbow against a low ridge of scales so perfectly placed that they seemed as if they’d been made for this very task.

I fired. The bolt went wide. I fired again. The second grazed red scales but skittered off, falling down to the sea.

No, I whispered. *Damn it*.

Keep going, Nyxaris said calmly. *Do not fixate on mistakes*.

Behind us, Vorago roared. I fired a third bolt. This one struck home, skidding along Vorago’s flank and tearing open a wide gash. Vorago screamed, the sound so loud it rattled me. I sucked in a breath, fired again, missed again. It continued this way, less than a third of my shots landing. The wind was vicious, and Vorago was fast.

I can do this. Panic swelled. I fired again—the bolt hit home, ripping open the same wound, tearing the flesh wider. “Yes!” I cried aloud.

That’s enough, Nyxaris declared. *Now we go back*. He turned.

Vorago surged forward, jaws snapping eagerly. I screamed as I felt the heat of his breath wash over us and saw the flames rushing up. Nyxaris twisted at the last possible second, wings clipping the air as my stomach lurched violently. My crossbow forgotten for now, I clung to him as he descended quickly, flying low and hard toward Bloodwing—exactly as we’d planned. The towers loomed ahead of us. The sea rushed up from below, and I saw the beach. This was it. We only had one chance.

I glanced back. Vorago hadn’t caught up. Was it my imagination, or had his wings faltered slightly?

He weakens, Nyxaris crowed. *Do you see it? He slows*.

I held my breath as we flew past Medra. She fired. Bolts streamed up from below. Vorago shrieked in shock as emberfern arrows penetrated his flank. He twisted wildly. Theo next, farther along the beach. The only reason I could see him was because I knew where to look. Bolts flew. He missed. Missed again.

Oh no, I breathed.

Visha was our last chance. With Vorago still on our tail, Nyxaris flew as slowly as he was able, just out of the reach of dragon fire.

No! Nyxaris snarled. *The idiot girl.*

I should have known Visha wouldn't hesitate. She'd stood up, leaving the sanctuary of the rocks she was supposed to be hiding behind, her crossbow raised. She sprinted across the beach, coming as close as she could as we flew over. I swiveled around to watch. Visha planted her feet and fired. One bolt had sunk deep.

My heart soared. *She did it,* I told Nyxaris. Another flew and landed beside the other. *That's it!* I exclaimed. *That has to be enough.*

Behind us, Vorago let out a scream of agony and rage, still close behind us. He'd passed Visha, and I let out a breath. For one wild hopeful moment, I thought he hadn't seen her at all, that he was too focused on us to have noticed the highblood girl standing alone on the sand. Then the red dragon banked—hard. He turned around with a roar that split the air and swung back toward the beach.

Nyxaris! I gasped. *Visha.*

Nyxaris was already turning. Visha ran, sprinting down the shoreline, boots pounding against the wet sand, as Vorago flew toward her, swooping down low. His jaws opened and fire poured out, a sheet of red death that chased Visha. She dove, throwing herself forward and rolling into the water as the sand exploded with dragon fire just where she'd been. The heat slapped me in the face even from the air.

Nyxaris roared and then dropped down like a comet, fire erupting from his throat and slamming into Vorago's side from behind. I sucked in my breath. We hadn't wanted it to come to this. We all knew what the risk was, but Inferni were well-near indestructible—and if we were going to help Blake, we had to bring Vorago down.

Now Nyxaris didn't hesitate. His flames struck exactly where the emberfern bolts had already lodged. Vorago shrieked—a sound so full of

pain my teeth ached. He twisted violently in midair, his flight suddenly stuttering and uneven. He banked to face us. Everything slowed.

We were so close I could see Vorago's teeth—massive and white, lit up by the flames behind them. His neck was coiled as his jaw opened. His body was aligned for the kill. He was going to bite Nyxaris. He was going to rip out his throat.

I screamed as my body braced for the impact. Suddenly Vorago veered away, not gracefully or cleanly, but like a ball yanked off course by an invisible chain. His body tilted. His flight was suddenly haphazard and wrong.

My heart lifted. *Nyxaris, look!* I clutched him, laughter and tears bursting out at the same time. *It worked. It worked! Can you speak to him? Can you reach Blake?*

Nyxaris didn't answer. I tried to be patient, knew he must be reaching out, trying to communicate with the other dragon, still checking for traces of Vorago. My heart pounded with hope. This was it. This was the moment. The emberfern was working. Surely Blake could push back now and take control.

Something is wrong. The concern in Nyxaris's voice made my stomach drop. *I cannot reach him.*

Before I could reply, something hissed through the air just in front of my face with a sharp, slicing sound.

What was that? My mind was still on Blake. *A bird?*

Nyxaris froze. *Not a bird. Get down. Now. As low as you can. Hold on—*

But it was too late. Pain exploded along my side. I looked down to see the bolt protruding from my ribs, just as Nyxaris let out a roar of pain. He turned sharply, heading out toward open water, clearly intending to get me away from the island. Another bolt struck me. This one knocked the breath from my lungs. The world tipped.

Fireheart, what have they done to you? Speak to me.

I tried to open my mouth, but I couldn't. I felt my grip failing. I blinked, trying to focus. It was no use. I felt myself slide, felt scales tear from my hands as I slipped free.

Fireheart! Nyxaris roared.

The sky spun.

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CHAPTER 19

MEDRA



"Where are you going?" I whispered. I stood on the beach, my crossbow still in my hands. My heart hammered hard. The plan had been insane—simple and brutal and risky. Yet it seemed to have worked. Nyxaris drew Vorago out with his blood, the emberfern bolts did their job to weaken him. Blake would surface, take control from Vorago, and then Nyxaris would lead him to safety. They would carefully land. But now Nyxaris was flying off course.

I didn't have time to watch where he was going. My eyes locked on the red dragon—on Blake. He was still airborne, but his flight was uneven. Something was happening. We were missing our chance. Nyxaris had lost him. The red dragon was slowing, flying off on his own.

I watched in panic as the Inferni curved around the far end of the island and slipped out of sight beyond the rocky point. For a second, I stood there, frozen, staring at the sky where he'd been. Then I started to run. Even as my lungs burned, I knew it was pointless. I couldn't catch a dragon. Could I?

"Medra!"

I skidded to a halt. Theo was there. He had Visha in his arms. The sight of her made my stomach lurch. Her jacket was burned black across the shoulders and chest. The leather had been fused to her skin in places. Where the flesh was exposed, her skin was ruined. Highbloods were strong—they healed fast and rarely scarred. But this … My stomach heaved.

"Oh gods," I breathed. "Visha!"

She was still conscious. Her teeth were clenched, and her brow was slick with sweat and seawater. Theo adjusted his hold on her and a horrible sound tore from her throat.

“Shit,” Theo whispered. “I’m sorry, Vish.” He looked at me, his face anguished. “It’s my fault. My aim was off. I missed. If I’d hit with my shots … if I hadn’t …”

“Don’t,” I said quickly. “Don’t do that. It’s not your fault. We all knew what we were getting into.” It could have been me in Theo’s arms, burned with dragon fire. But I was still standing. And meanwhile, Vorago—Blake—was getting farther away from us by the minute.

“She ran out.” Theo’s voice cracked. He looked stunned. “She ran to get a clearer shot. I didn’t stop her … I …”

My gaze moved to Visha’s wounds. I swallowed hard. “Theo, it isn’t your fault. And what Visha did was incredible.”

“I know I’m incredible, bitch,” Visha muttered weakly. “Blood-dammit, I am going to hit that asshole so hard when I see him next.” She started coughing. Her whole body seemed to spasm.

“Shit,” Theo said, looking down. He looked back at me, his eyes wide. “I think she passed out.”

I took a deep breath. “I hate to ask you this but …”

Theo lifted his chin. “It’s all right. I can get her to the infirmary by myself.”

“You’re sure?” I asked meeting his eyes, my voice trembling slightly. I hated this, hated that I had to leave them.

“I’ll be fine,” he said stoutly. “You go get Blake.”

Something butted against my calf.

“Medra.” Theo’s voice was excited. “Look.”

Neville was at my feet. Belatedly, I realized he’d been yapping and yipping at me for a while. But I’d been too worried and distracted to notice. Now his tiny body practically vibrated with agitation.

“I’d almost forgotten you were here,” I murmured.

He darted in a circle around me, then growled and latched his tiny teeth onto my boot and clamped down hard.

“Ouch! Neville, stop.” I leaned down, hands on my thighs. “What are you doing? Blake isn’t here. Can’t you see that?”

He let go of me, hopping backward, then turned to face me and chirped loudly.

“I think he wants me to follow him.” I looked at the fluffin. “This isn’t part of the plan, Nev. Do you know where Blake is?”

Neville chirped enthusiastically. Then he raced down the beach, stopping after a few feet to look back at me. He yipped loudly.

My heart sped up. “Do you think he knows where Blake went?”

“You’d better hope so,” Theo said. “He’s here for a reason. He knows what he’s doing. He helped you once before, that night in the Dragon Court. I think we have to trust him now.”

“Right. I’ll follow him,” I said, already moving.

“I’ll meet you back at Drakharrow Tower.” Theo hesitated, then added. “Try not to die. Good luck.”

I nodded, hoping I looked more confident than I felt. Then I took off after the fluffin. As soon as he knew I was following, Neville led the way without hesitation. My backpack bounced heavily against my shoulders as I ran after him. Overhead, the castle’s towers loomed high, their shadows stretching out over the rocky cliff face. The beach narrowed, and the rock wall on my right pressed closer. Neville suddenly vanished behind a cluster of stones near the base of the cliff.

“Neville!” I stopped for a moment to catch my breath and hoist the pack higher. Then I scrambled around the rocks. At first all I saw were boulders. Then I heard it: a loud bark echoing from within. There, half-hidden behind the stones, was a narrow opening, hardly more than a crack. I swore. Then I pulled the backpack off my shoulders. This was not going to be fun.

I paused, glancing around the beach, when a memory slammed into me. *A moonlit night. A bonfire. A tiny creature bleeding in the sand.*

“This is where I found you,” I whispered. “That night …”

Neville answered from within the stone passage with a high-pitched yip, as if telling me to stop remembering things and just hurry up.

I dropped to my knees, shoved my pack forward, and squeezed in after him. The rocks scraped against my shoulders as I crawled. The passage was cold and tight, and smelled wet and earthy. I didn’t even want to think about getting back out again. After a few minutes, the tunnel widened. I emerged into a broader passage and pushed myself upright again. Only a small amount of light filtered in from the way I’d just come. “Neville?”

A yip sounded from a few feet ahead in the dark. I took a cautious step, my hand flat against the stone. I heard the fluffin’s paws scrambling over dirt. I followed, more by sound than sight. One hand skimmed the wall as I listened for Neville’s little yips as he darted ahead.

The passage twisted and turned, sometimes narrowing, but never so low I couldn’t keep upright. Light appeared ahead. The tunnel turned, then opened suddenly. I stepped into a long stone corridor. On my right side was solid rock. On my left, the stone face opened to the sea with rough columns and arches, the only things separating the passage from the waves crashing below. I’d been here before, while following Blake. My mouth twisted in memory. How I’d hated him then, and how much simpler that had been. Now here I was, following a fluffin through the tunnels, hunting for Blake again—but for far different reasons.

I moved on through the ancient passage, my gaze tracing over the high arched ceiling and the stone ledges. Not for the first time I speculated that they might have been dragon lairs, places where the dragons had come to perch and rest beneath the school, while their riders had slept in the towers above them. Back when there had been more dragons. Had those been better days? It was hard to imagine living in times more chaotic than these ones.

Neville veered away from the open arches and plunged back into a dark tunnel.

“Shit,” I muttered, hurrying to follow.

This passageway was deeper. The air grew cooler as I walked. The sound of the sea faded, replaced by a heavy hush. I walked on and on, hoping I’d been right to put my faith in the little orange furry creature who had always seemed to know far more than he should. “You have that in common with Rodriguez,” I murmured. “You should be in the Emberwatch.” The thought of Neville trying to master a secret handshake briefly replaced the ones in my mind of Blake bleeding out alone on a beach somewhere, and despite my anxiety I grinned.

Then the space suddenly opened, and I stopped short. I’d entered an enormous cavern, wide enough and high enough for a dragon to fully stretch its wings. The stone floor sloped down toward an opening at the far end where light spilled in from the sea beyond.

And there at the edge of the light lay Blake.

He was on his side, motionless. He was in highblood form, but his wings were still out and folded behind him. For the first time I took them in: scarlet and shimmering. They really were beautiful.

My heart pounded so hard it hurt to breathe. And then I was moving, running down the slope. Blake was breathing—shallow, uneven breaths—

but breathing.

"Shit," I murmured as I watched him, hesitating. It was all very well to make abstract plans. And it was quite another to actually enact them. I knew what I had to do. I knew I had to do it. But it was going to be so fucking hard.

Neville bounded ahead. He stopped beside Blake, yipping softly and circling him at first, then butting his little head insistently against his chest. My heart sped up as Blake stirred. Barely a movement, then an intake of breath. His fingers tightened. His lashes fluttered once, twice. His eyes opened fully.

My heart sank as I saw their color: red like Viktor Drakharrow's. At first they were dimmed, then, slowly, they focused. I watched him take me in. There was a lump in my throat.

"Pendragon," he rasped. He tried to push himself up onto his elbows.

I made a sound I could hardly recognize as mine and sank to my knees beside him. Neville sat back on his haunches, staying close and watchful. I wondered if the little creature knew what came next.

Blake's gaze moved over my face. "Why—" he coughed weakly "—why are you crying?"

I scrubbed at my cheeks with the back of one hand, holding my backpack close in the other. "I—" I swallowed hard. "Is it … really you?"

He gave a weak, crooked smile that stole straight into my heart. Unmistakably Blake. "Yeah. It's me." He winced as if even speaking hurt. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Fuck you, Blake Drakharrow." My chest tightened painfully as he grinned again. "And Vorago?"

"The emberfern worked, but he's still in here," he said quietly. "I can feel him. He's angry. Not like that's anything new."

I nodded. "All right." Both of my hands fumbled in the back-pack now.

Blake raised a brow. "All right?"

I breathed in deeply. "That's what I needed to know."

Neville let out a sharp, piercing cry that echoed off the stones. But if he was trying to stop me, then he was too late. I'd already pulled out the dagger we'd enchanted and driven it straight into Blake's heart.

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CHAPTER 20

BLAKE



…Scaled will to scaled vein. One furnace, one cry.”

I could feel my life’s blood pouring out. The pain came in waves, but at least I could still hear her voice.

“Let the weaker ember sigh …”

The words were vaguely familiar. Pendragon was repeating them, like a prayer she was afraid to stop saying.

“Let the weaker ember sigh, let the greater spirit fly. The elder burns and the younger fades away.”

I knew those words; I’d spoken them once before. That night I’d opened the door to my very soul and let Vorago inside.

Distantly, I felt Pendragon press her forehead against mine. She was still crying. Warm drops fell from her face onto mine. I could still see her—at least I’d been given that gift. I could look at her one last time. Gods, she looked wrecked. Beautiful and awful, furious and devastated. I knew it was my fault. I’d done that to her. I lifted my hand, a little surprised when it actually moved. It felt like it had been so long since I’d been in my own body. My fingers were cold, but I managed to brush my thumb clumsily across her cheekbones. “Pendragon … it’s all right. Don’t cry.”

She shook her head mutely, her eyes pleading.

I coughed out a weak laugh. “Really, it’s fine. I had it coming. Honestly, it’s a miracle you didn’t stab me years ago.”

The sound that tore out of her was like another stab to the heart. Half wail, half-heartbreaking laugh. “I’m sorry,” she choked. “I’m so, so fucking sorry.”

“Hey,” I said awkwardly. “It’s all right. I get it.” And I did. The truth had been sitting with me for a while. Now it seemed clearer than it had ever

been. “I was never worth saving. And after what I did to the city? This was the price I needed to pay. I’m just glad you finally saw that, too.”

Her breath hitched sharply. My chest felt cold now. My hands tingled. My feet seemed suddenly very far away. So, this was it, then.

I forced myself to get the words out. I was almost out of time. “I’m grateful. You know that?” I coughed, my body spasming. But I forced myself on. “I’m grateful I found you that day. That I got to have … any of this. That I got to know you. To hold you.” The words tangled in my mouth, and I hesitated, but this wasn’t the time for blooddamned cowardice. “I’m so fucking grateful I got to love you, Pendragon. Even if it was only for a little while.”

She sobbed.

“Loving you,” I went on. I paused as another cough wracked my body. Blood spilled from my lips. I didn’t want to frighten her, but I couldn’t wipe it away. I tried to choke it down. “Loving you is the best thing I’ve ever done. I’m glad you’ll survive. That you’ll make the world a better place. If my dying does that, then—”

“Shut the fuck up, Blake Drakharrow,” she whispered fiercely.

“Won’t even let a dying man have his last words,” I mumbled.

Then she kissed me. It was a good kiss. If I’d been able to move, it would have been even better. Still, a dying man takes what he can get. Her mouth pressed to mine, desperate and aching, I tried to kiss her back as best I could.

Finally she pulled back. Looked into my eyes. “This is probably going to hurt.”

I couldn’t speak. The blood continued flowing from my lips. I wanted to tell her whatever she was about to do next, I doubted it could hurt more than being stabbed in the fucking heart.

She looked over her shoulder. “Neville.”

I’d forgotten the fluffin was there. Vaguely, I watched as Nev climbed up onto my chest. I couldn’t feel the creature’s warmth—everything was going too cold for that now. But I tried to smile down at the little rascal.

Medra put one hand on the fluffin’s back, then the other on the hilt of the dagger buried in my chest. I watched as she closed her eyes.

A scream ripped out of me, and before I could even try to stop it from happening, two minds pierced mine.

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CHAPTER 21

MEDRA



Nyxaris had tried to warn me; through Florence, he'd told me what might happen. What it *meant* to do this. But there was no warning that could have fully prepared me for experiencing this myself.

I crossed Blake's walls—he really hadn't even tried to keep me out. He was too weak to put up his thrallguard defenses. Immediately I felt a different presence. Not Blake, someone else. Angry and red and terrible: Vorago. He was fury and flame, coiled inside Blake like a foul infection in a rotting wound.

I walked toward him, ignoring the pain he flung at me in a wave. He lashed out with his tail. I jumped easily around it. He was too weak to try again. I studied the dragon that had taken Blake. He was weak, but his fury was still so vast it was almost incomprehensible. Nyxaris was right: at some point, Vorago had ceased being a dragon. He'd become a demon of rage and fire. He ought to have taken the way out Blake had offered when he'd had the chance. It might have been more merciful than what I was about to do to him.

You are too late, Vorago snarled. *If I die, the boy will die with me. I am all that holds the pathetic pieces of his mind together*.

You're wrong. I tried to keep my voice steady, but secretly I was terrified he might be right.

Vorago laughed. *You used the Duskdrake's blood. You have sealed both our deaths.*

No, I said confidently. *I haven't sealed Blake's death. I've severed you*. I lifted my hands. "Neville!"

The world shifted. The fluffin was by my side, as if he'd always been there. He was small and glowing like a star, and unlike me, he was utterly

unafraid. He barked once—sharp and self-assured.

And Vorago … died. Not with a scream or a struggle but with a whimper like a child might make. He had no soul left to save. He was simply snuffed out in a burst of light. The last traces of his fury collapsed and vanished.

Distantly I could hear Blake screaming. I didn't turn toward the sound or look away. Instead, I watched Neville—this wasn't over yet. The fluffin padded forward through the space of Blake's mind, his nose low to the ground, his tail flicking as if following a scent only he could discern. He moved purposefully, searching for something.

And then I felt it, too. Another presence, but not Vorago, nor the boy Blake had once been or the man he had forced himself to become. This was both Blake and not Blake. This was pure *dragon*.

Blake's true dragon lay hidden deep within him, starved and wounded and scared. It was furious—but in a different way than Vorago had been. This was the part Blake loathed about himself, the part he'd tried to bury and deny. The part that rejected the power and hunger that he knew embracing his dragon would bring. In seeing Blake's dragon I saw the truth. I saw the darkness in him. Not the corruption Vorago had infected him with and which was gone now. This was the raw, terrifying will to violence Blake had always carried within him, passed on through his bloodline from generation to generation. The part of him that was willing to burn cities and shatter worlds, to kill if it meant keeping what he most treasured safe.

If it meant keeping *me* safe. This was love, yes, but twisted into something dark and dangerous.

Neville saw what I saw. He reached the coiled dragon, but he did not command. Nor did he fight. Instead, he sang. His small body glowed, and his voice lifted in a soft melodic trill as he accepted and took in both sides of Blake's spirit, the split halves of his soul, gently urging them to reconcile. As he sang he healed, stitching dragon to man, raw anger to conscience.

But as Blake's soul began to knit, something else began to fade. A frost crept inward, stealing away the boy who smirked. The boy who bled. The boy who loved me desperately and fiercely and with no regard for himself.

I pulled back, retreating up and out, ripping myself free of Blake's mind with a gasp that tasted of blood and grief. The cavern around me slammed back into existence—and Neville sang on, tireless and pure, glowing like a firefly. Beneath me, Blake's body was too cold, too still, his breath barely

there. I yanked the dagger free from his chest and pressed it to my wrist. Blood welled up instantly, dark and hot, spilling over my palm. I lifted my wrist to Blake's mouth.

Blake's eyelashes fluttered as the blood spilled down his chin. He sputtered, gasped.

"Drink," I cried, as at the same moment I leaned down and sank my teeth into his neck. I didn't have fangs, but my teeth were sharp enough. The taste of him flooded into me. Iron and fire. I gasped against his skin, my fingers clawing into his shoulder. As his blood filled my mouth, the bond snapped tight between us, a current that rushed both ways at once, blazing awake.

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CHAPTER 22

BLAKE



Like I said, it was a miracle, really, that Pendragon hadn't killed me before this.

I remembered that day back in the library when she'd once teased me about doing it then and there. I'd still been with Regan then. I remembered holding her hand, pretending to be happy, all with the hope of getting a rise out of Pendragon. I'd been so desperate to make her jealous when the truth was even then she was the only one I wanted. She was the one I could never make myself stay away from. Me, the moth. Her, the flame. It all felt so long ago.

I remembered watching Pendragon in the Consort Games. Watching her struggle but survive—thanks to the power of my blood.

I remembered her lying under me in my bed. Her naked and me so fucking terrified of destroying the moment. I'd traced her freckles. I'd felt her shudder as she came.

I remembered when I'd almost fucking killed her.

That's how I'd gotten to this point in the first place. She'd nearly died and I'd … I'd had enough. Anything had seemed better than that. *Anything.* And now—now here I was. But so was she.

I came back to myself in fragments at first. I felt sensation. There was heat. Pressure. Sound, or at least the absence of it. The fluffin had stopped singing. Dimly, I felt the little creature lift from my chest. Then he was gone.

The sweet taste of blood trickling down my throat hit me like a crash of thunder, power sweeping through me like a jolt of lightning. My heart lurched into a rhythm that felt much too fast—as if trying to remember what life was.

I tasted *her*.

I opened my eyes. Pendragon's wrist was pressed to my lips, her blood rich on my tongue, intoxicating and heady. I made a ragged sound of protest, tried to pull back, panic flaring. This was wrong. I couldn't hurt her again. I wouldn't.

No. Don't. Her voice. I didn't hear it with my ears. Her lips hadn't moved. She was in my head.

Understanding hit me like a slap in the face. She'd done it. She'd dared. I felt the bond between us, stronger than it had ever been. She hadn't just tried to kill me—she'd tried to kill me to save me. Then she'd fed me.

My hands twitched at my sides, uselessly at first. Then they lifted, locked around her waist. She was real. Solid under my fingers. I tightened my grip as her blood poured into me, strength rushing through me like a fire in my veins. I swallowed her sweetness, feeling the rush of power. Once, then again. I couldn't stop, couldn't resist. Fuck, I'd never been able to resist her.

She moaned softly against my neck, and then I felt it. I felt what she was taking from me in return. I felt dizzy. The pull of the bond feeding back on itself was so strong, tightening around me until there was no room to breathe. I tasted her—longing and fear and hard resolve. I tasted her grief threaded with something unbearably raw and tender. She destroyed me, always had. I'd told myself a thousand times that I could resist, that I could want someone else—even try to fucking *be* someone else. But I'd been lying to myself the entire time. This was inevitable. *We* were inevitable. That day I'd found her, the road had always been leading here.

She moaned again.

Pendragon, I thought desperately, *what the hell do you want from me?*

Her answer left no room for doubt. *All of you.*

My throat constricted. Once all it had taken was a single whiff of a drop of her blood to send me over the edge. So this? I was drunk, lost. I was a starving animal, unable to restrain himself as I moved to strip everything separating us aside. The world narrowed. Outside, the world was growing dark. Sunset was washing away, rich violet fading to streaks of gold. Down below, the waves smashed onto the rocks. But I barely noticed any of it. I was too aware of her.

I pushed myself up, still holding Pendragon on top of me. Behind me, my wings uncurled and expanded, the last of the sun hitting them and turning the light crimson. My hands moved on their own, slow and reverent. I

tugged at her straps and buckles, pushed fabric aside. She didn't stop me. Instead she leaned into me, her lips still wet with my blood, her breath hot on my neck, fingers clutching my shoulders as she urged me on.

Yes, yes, yes.

The shared pulse of need and relief and something that threatened to become joy. I pressed my lips to her body, breathing her in: salt and blood and autumn leaves. She was my anchor. My rider. My mate. I had been starving. Not just for blood, but for *this*. For her choosing me—and being chosen in return.

I lifted her, then eased her down onto me, filling her. She tilted her head, exposing her long neck, her pale throat, the freckles that covered her collarbone and breasts. She moaned as I thrust into her, slowly, languidly, determined to seduce all her senses.

"Fucking you is always a holy experience, Pendragon," I whispered, seeking her mouth. My tongue glided hot against hers. The kiss stretched on, heat rising and growing, threatening to spill over like the tide. We shared one breath. We spoke mind to mind. Our bodies were connected, sharing pleasure, sharing power. And it felt so fucking good I could hardly breathe. She spread her legs a little wider, and I thrust hard, filling her completely.

Her mouth broke from mine. "Blake, please …"

"Do you know how much I want you?" I whispered. "Do you know how beautiful you are to me, Medra Pendragon?" I pulled back slightly, looking her up and down. She was covered in blood and sweat and tears. She was incandescently lovely. I lifted my hips, joining with her, my pace moving faster. I could see her nearing that peak, but I wanted to draw it out a little longer. "I don't want this to end," I murmured against her lush mouth. "I want to fuck you forever." I kissed her as my hands smoothed over her breasts, cupping them and cradling them, skimming fingers over the tips as she moaned with pleasure.

Her body pressed hard against me as my rhythm quickened. I lowered my hand to rub my fingers against the aching spot between her legs as I thrust, and her head tilted back in abandon as she cried out. We came together, pleasure as powerful as dragon fire, her name a moan on my lips. I came harder than I had in my life, dreading the moment I'd have to let go of her.

I closed my eyes as she swayed against me, her body limp. "Couldn't scare you away, could I?" I murmured against her cheek.

“I’m not going anywhere. When will you learn that.”

I chuckled. “Can’t even murder me properly.”

“I stabbed you as hard as I could. Should I do it again?”

I chuckled. Still, as she nuzzled her forehead with mine, guilt washed over me.

I can feel that, you know.

What? I said sheepishly.

“The shame taking over you,” she said aloud. “Don’t do that. I’ve already seen the darkest parts of you. My love didn’t flinch.”

I kissed her lightly. “Might take some getting used to, that’s all. You being inside my head.”

Her face softened. *My edges are broken, too. I’ve seen your sins and your scars. I’ve seen what you think makes you unlovable. And I love you anyway.* She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was thick with emotion. *I’ve fallen for you so hard, Blake. When I thought I’d lost you …* She met my eyes. “Don’t make me say it out loud,” she whispered.

I gripped her close and shut my eyes. I didn’t think I could handle seeing her face as I said, *I fell with you. I fell harder. I fell first.*

“Ouch!” I yelped.

She’d punched my arm. “It’s not a godsdamned competition.”

I grinned. “Sure, but I won, right?”

She snickered. “Maybe.”

“Fine, then. I’ll *allow* you to love me.” I sounded like an asshole and knew it.

“Oh, he’s smirking again. Now, there’s the Blake I know,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “What a relief.”

“Wait, you need to know this, Pendragon.” I took a deep breath. “I worship you. I serve only you. From the beginning until the end, you are it for me. You alone, for all my days. Nothing and no one else will ever claim me.”

She held very still. Then she said, “There’s been a lot of talk of burning the world down, but I don’t want ashes at my feet. I want your hand in mine as we make this world into something better.”

She kissed me gently—but I could feel something lingering there, something she wasn’t saying. Still, I didn’t argue. I just held her there in the safety of the dark, my wings raised around us.

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CHAPTER 23

KAGE



A warm breeze blew through the tall arched windows as I strode down the corridor. Someone had thrown the windows open at some point earlier in the day. The air smelled like salt from the sea and green, budding life. Laughter drifted around me as students rushed by, heading to class or study halls.

A student bumped me hard, and the mug of kava they were holding sloshed over the edge and onto my dark gray jacket. They stared at the spot on my lapel in horror, the kava dribbling down their hand. “S-s-sorry, House Leader.”

I glared at them. Then I noticed the blue and silver First Year colors they wore. Dwarven, too. They looked like they wanted to melt right through the stones. I imagined what my face must look like and decided to take pity on them. “It’s fine,” I said gruffly. “Get a move on. Watch where you walk from now on, First Year.”

“I will, House Leader,” they assured me, their voice a high-pitched squeak. “I swear I’ll be more careful.”

I didn’t respond, just moved on. I flexed my shoulders as I walked. My body felt good. Healed. The torn flesh in my chest had closed. The pain was just a memory now. Lysander had stressed how severe my wounds had been. I had scars that might even last. For now, I treasured them. They were a reminder of her.

Weeks had passed since I’d last seen Regan. Since Viktor had taken her away. Weeks of fruitless searching that had led absolutely nowhere. Lysander and I had torn through maps, dispatched scouts, called in favors. The maps were still spread out over the tables in Lysander’s room. We marked and remarked them almost every night. We’d gone out searching

ourselves whenever we'd been able to get away. Lysander had been using his special abilities—the ones Orphos kept such a closely guarded secret. But Viktor Drakharrow remained a ghost, and Regan a ghost along with him.

Then there was the matter of Veilmar. For a while there, I'd thought I might be the last of my line, but I should have known Elaria Avari would be harder to kill. My mother hadn't been as lucky. They found her body a few days after the fires were put out, pulled from the rubble of the Avari estate. My grandmother and I had gone to identify her. She'd looked so small lying there, wrapped in a white sheet. My grandmother had sworn vengeance, but secretly I wondered who most deserved our revenge. Because unlike my grandmother, I knew the truth: Viktor Drakharrow hadn't destroyed Veilmar, his nephew had done that. Sure, Blake had been commanded to do it. And sure, he was supposedly being controlled by Vorago. Medra and Rodriguez had told me all that, and I believed them, but didn't Blake still bear some responsibility for what he'd done? It had been *him*, not Viktor, who'd swept over Veilmar and laid the Avari compound to rubble, killing my mother inside it. Yes, Blake had been dragged there by Viktor's greed and cruelty, but he'd done the burning and the breaking and the killing.

He'd asked me for help with his dragon before, but I'd balked at sharing Avari secrets. I'd honestly thought he'd figure it out on his own. That, or wind up dead. How was I supposed to know he'd use blood magic and accidentally invite an ancient Inferni to share his soul and body with him? Truthfully, these days, it shouldn't have really surprised me. It was the dull and ordinary moments that were the real surprise. Besides, it didn't matter, did it? I couldn't squeeze my hands around Blake Drakharrow's throat even if I wanted to. He'd disappeared just like Viktor. If I wanted to be sympathetic—which I didn't—I might even say he'd been abducted by a dragon, too, like Regan.

I gave a bitter laugh, and some students walking a little too close jumped away, looking like startled sea gulls on a beach.

As soon as I'd left the Orphos infirmary, my real life had crashed down hard. I had House Leader duties. School council meetings and rebuilding committee meetings chaired, of course, by my grand-mother. She'd even stuck me on the Dragon Oversight Committee that seemed like a joke considering the circumstances. I was held together by sheer force of will—and by Lysander. Without Lysander Orphos, I'd have been lost. He

reminded me to hold fast to hope. He reminded me that Regan was still out there—alive. And she needed us. With every day that passed, she needed us more, even if she didn't know it yet.

Belatedly, I realized something was happening. Around me, the corridor was breaking into chaos—students running to the windows, dropping books and bags as they collided with one another in their eagerness to look outside. There were shouts and screams. A student turned from the window and started to run past me, his face deathly white.

I grabbed him by the shoulder. "What is it?"

The boy's breathing was rapid. "T-two dragons."

I released the boy and shoved my way over to the window, not bothering to move aside the students who were already at the front. I could see over their heads anyway. I looked out at the sea and saw them. The first I recognized immediately—Nyxaris with his obsidian wings. He was far away, but I thought I glimpsed a rider on his back, which would be Florence. The other dragon was red, obviously an Inferni. But which one? With the sunlight reflecting off the red dragon's scales, I couldn't tell.

"Bloodmaiden! Will you look at that," a student nearby me shouted.

There were gasps and screams as the red dragon began to chase the black. We watched as bolts flew into the sky from somewhere below the castle. The red dragon was wounded. We saw it swoop low, then disappear. There was a moment of stunned silence.

"Is it gone?" a highblood girl whispered from behind me.

I turned to tell her it seemed to be over, that everything was all right. Then, someone else screamed. I turned around.

"Oh, Bloodmaiden," someone moaned.

"What happened?" I demanded.

"Another bolt. It went toward Nyxaris," a boy cried.

"Where did the bolt come from?" I asked the crowd.

There was confused chatter.

"I think it came from the beach," one student claimed.

I frowned. That didn't make sense. I watched the small figure on Nyxaris's back. Florence looked so tiny from this distance. It was hard to tell what was happening to her.

Then more screams.

"Another bolt!"

"She's hit! The rider is hit."

Behind me, the girl who had asked if the dragons had left began to sob.

Another flash of metal soared through the sky. This time I saw where it landed. Nyxaris's body jerked.

Florence fell.

Screams tore through the corridor as we helplessly watched her plummet. Nyxaris was distracted. The black dragon wheeled, searching wildly for the source of the attack. My body was poised for motion, ready to head for the stairs, my blood already flooding with the familiar feeling that came before a shift. If I could reach Florence in the water fast enough, maybe, just maybe …

Another wave of screams from the students by the window. I glanced out to see a red shape surge across the sky. The red dragon swooped downward, plucking Florence's body from the sea. My heart slammed against my ribs. Who the fuck was that, Blake or Viktor?

A hand touched my upper arm. I spun, fist already cocked.

"Don't. It's me." Lysander grabbed my arm. "Follow me. We need to go."

I trailed him down the corridor, weaving through the gathered crowd of students. Every student in Bloodwing seemed to have filtered into the window-lined corridor overlooking the sea. Teachers were there, too. I saw a group of librarians standing together, looking pale and frightened. I scanned their faces, but Jia wasn't among them. I was sure she'd find out what had happened to her daughter soon enough.

"Did you see what happened just now?" I demanded. Lysander ignored me as he moved into the stairwell. "Lysander! Did you hear me? We have to go and help."

His feet pounded up the stairs. I followed, taking them two at a time. He yanked the door at the top open, and only then did I realize where he was headed—toward the Drakharrow Tower.

"Where are you going? Why there?"

But he wouldn't stop to explain. Lysander marched down the hall, his long gold coat flaring behind him. Students ran past us, voices raised in fear as they discussed the dragons. Lysander stopped just outside the entrance to the Drakharrow Tower, and that's when I saw him. Theo Drakharrow stood alone in the hall, hands braced on his knees, breathing hard. Lysander strode up to him. "Tell me where you just came from and what exactly happened down there on the beach."

Theo blinked. “What? I just came from the infirmary. I brought Visha there.”

“Why?” Lysander’s voice was dangerously low.

“I … She …” Theo cleared his throat. “Dragon fire. She was hit by dragon fire.”

“Which dragon attacked her?” I demanded.

“Blake. I mean, Vorago. That’s why we did all of this. To try to help Blake. To get him back.”

“What exactly did you do?” Lysander asked.

Theo blanched. “We set up on the beach like we’d planned. Nyxaris drew Vorago in. Florence was the lure. We fired at Vorago.” He took a deep breath. “The Inferni was wounded. He took off. Medra went after him, and I came back to the castle with Visha. She’s in rough shape.”

Lysander was studying him closely. “Florence Shen fell to the sea and was taken by a red dragon. Who was that dragon—Blake?”

“What? No, there’s no way that was Blake,” Theo whispered, his face full of terror. “It must have been Viktor.”

Lysander nodded as if Theo had just confirmed something he already knew. “The House Orphos healers have a remarkable salve for dragon fire. I recommend you send for some of it. You may tell them I authorized it.”

“Thank you,” Theo mumbled. “But …”

Lysander was already marching away. I caught up with him. “Stop, Lysander. Tell me what’s going on. Where are we going?”

He paused and turned to look at me, his blue eyes intense. “When Viktor Drakharrow shifted into his dragon, I was able to break through to Regan. I saw the room she was in—and some of the people she was with.”

“You know where she is?”

“I have a guess. I may be wrong. Based on what I saw, she’s at a fortress about twenty miles outside of Veilmar to the east.”

That was all I needed to hear. Around us, the school was in a state of upheaval. Doors were being flung open, students spilling into the corridors, their voices loud with fright and confusion. I cut through them all like a sword, moving toward the main entrance at a run. Lysander matched me stride for stride. Every instinct pulled me toward speed. Speed and teeth.

“Slow down,” Lysander said. “Slow down and think.”

“You can have one but not the other,” I said, not breaking my pace. “I already have thought. Viktor has Regan and Florence. What’s he going to

do with them, Lysander?”

“He must know Regan is important to you,” Lysander said. “He must have guessed the real reason she didn’t die when she broke the vow. Florence is bound to Nyxaris. He wants leverage. He wants control.”

“Viktor was wounded. He could hardly fly. His wing was crushed. He was covered in black veins.”

“He wasn’t doing any fighting,” Lysander pointed out. “He came and got what he wanted, then he left.”

“Someone was helping him … but who? Who shot Nyxaris and Florence?” I clenched my jaw. “Probably someone from Mortis.”

“Whoever it was, they don’t matter right now.”

We burst through the main doors into the outer courtyard. The sounds and scents of spring hit us all at once: birdsong, warm air, green grass. Beyond, the road leading to the bridge spread out, and past that, the road leading around the city and out into the countryside. Maybe the spring air should have made me feel hopeful. But instead, all I could smell was death. Florence and Regan, two women Viktor wanted to break for his own ends. I thought of Regan, all fire and blood. Defiant even when she didn’t want to be—even when she shouldn’t have to be. Then, Florence. Smaller, quieter, but no less brave. Both their lives were hanging by a thread. They could die today. Or they could live to become something so much worse.

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CHAPTER 24

MEDRA



Hours later, Blake and I clambered through the tunnels and back into the castle. Hand in hand, we walked in a daze, like people newly reborn. Blake couldn't stop smiling at me, and I couldn't stop grinning back. I felt like I was floating. Everything was smiles and rainbows until we turned the corner to the House Drakharrow tower and stopped dead in our tracks. Theo stood there, looking haggard, and twisting his hands like a ghost haunting a cursed castle.

"Theo!" I exclaimed. "How long have you been out here?"

"What's wrong?" Blake demanded at the same time. "What happened?"

My heart stuttered. "Oh, gods. Is it Visha?"

Theo turned toward us, already flinching, and for a horrible second, I was sure she was dead. Then he must have seen the look in my eyes. He shook his head. "No, it's not Visha. The healer says she's stable. She— It's not that."

"Then, what?" I glanced at Blake. He looked as confused as I felt. "What's going on, Theo?"

He bit his lip nervously. "After you left, things kind of … went wrong."

"What do you mean *things went wrong*? What happened?" I demanded.

"Someone shot at Nyxaris," he said, talking fast. "And then they shot Florence."

I covered my mouth.

"What? Where is she?" Blake demanded. He squeezed my hand. "It's going to be all right. We'll go to her right now."

"You … you can't." Theo was wringing his hands together. "She fell."

A sob broke from my lips. "Theo, for fuck's sake, tell me right now—is Florence *dead*?"

He shook his head. “I don’t think she’s dead.” He met my eyes, then quickly looked away. Something was wrong here. Not just with Florence. “She hit the water. And then …” He closed his eyes. “Another red dragon came out of nowhere. It picked her up out of the water and flew off with her.”

The words rang in my ears. My voice was low and dangerous as I said, “Who the fuck shot them?”

Theo hesitated. The silence stretched.

“Theo,” Blake growled.

“I don’t know who shot Florence.” Theo looked like he desperately wanted someone to put him out of his misery. “I swear I don’t.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “But I do know who shot Nyxaris.”

My hands were shaking.

Theo opened his eyes. Tears streaked down his face. Shame was written into every line. “It was me.”

“What?” Blake breathed. He took a step toward his cousin.

Theo looked up at Blake. “I’m glad you’re back, cuz. But yeah, it was me. I did it.” He dragged a shaking sleeve across his face, his shoulders trembling.

I wanted to hug him. I wanted to kill him. But I couldn’t even move.

“I know it was wrong,” he said hoarsely. “I know that. Don’t think I don’t.” He swallowed hard. “But I had no other choice. Viktor has me in a choke hold.”

Blake went very still. “What do you mean?”

I looked back and forth between these two men I loved in such different ways, and I knew something terrible was coming.

Theo gave a bitter laugh. “Blackmail, of course.”

“What could Viktor possibly be blackmailing you about, Theo?” I asked softly.

Theo looked at me. “There are two things hanging over my head. For one, he has Vaughn. Vaughn’s family, too.”

I closed my eyes. “All right. That’s a reason.” And a pretty good one, too; I honestly couldn’t say I knew what I would have done in Theo’s shoes. I glanced at Blake—whose uncle hadn’t hesitated to use him to murder and to destroy—and I knew he knew it, too. We were not innocent. Our hands were not clean.

“What’s the second reason?” Blake asked, his face grim.

Theo's mouth trembled. "The second reason was about me. About who I am."

"Stop," Blake commanded. He grabbed Theo by the elbow, as gently as he could given the circumstances, and steered him toward the tower entrance. "We're not doing this here."

I followed them, my thoughts spinning. We moved through the Common Room and up the stairs to Blake's room. When Blake had pushed his cousin down into a chair and shut the door and locked it behind us, Theo crumbled.

"I didn't know," he said, voice breaking. "I swear to you, I didn't. I've believed what my mother told me all my life."

I was starting to feel like some blanks needed to be filled in. I looked over at Blake as I ran through what Theo had told me the day I first met him. His mother was Viktor's younger sister; Viktor and Alexander Drakharrow were Aryel's older brothers.

Blake frowned at his cousin. "What do you mean? What did Aryel tell you?"

"You know the story, I'm sure your parents told you—that she'd had an affair with a highblood man," Theo said dully. "He didn't want to form a triad as he was already in one. He didn't want to claim me either."

"You told me that you were born on the wrong side of the blanket," I said slowly. "That day we first met." I knew it was a euphemism for being a bastard, but I thought he'd been joking. Still, it was dawning on me that he bore his mother's surname and not his father's. "There's nothing wrong with being a bastard, Theo." Though it was an ugly word to describe a child, any child. "Who gives a shit if your father and mother weren't in a triad?"

Theo gave a hollow laugh. "But you see, I'm even more of a bastard than we thought."

"What do you mean?" Blake demanded.

Theo pressed a hand to his mouth. "Viktor told me the truth. That I wasn't just a bastard, not in the way I always thought." His eyes were helpless. "Don't you see? I'm his bastard. He's my father. My mom gave me this letter." Theo thrust a crumpled note toward us.

Blake held the letter as we both read silently.

Theo,

Necessity has a way of dragging even filth into the light. Know then that you are my bloodborn son. I take no pride in the affiliation. You are an embarrassment and

precisely the kind of man I most despise. Nevertheless, with this knowledge, you will now begin to act according to your place in this world. Your allegiance is mine. Your loyalty is not a matter for negotiation. You will receive instructions in the coming days. You will carry out these instructions without hesitation. If you obey, you may keep the foul little attachment you have made. If you do not, I will take it from you, piece by piece, while you stand powerlessly and observe. Your mother has learned her place. Now so will you. Do not test me. Do not speak of this to anyone.

—Viktor Drakharrow

Blake didn't move; his face was stunned. I felt dizzy with shock. "You mean, Aryel …"

"I don't think she wanted any of this, if that's what you're asking," Theo said swiftly.

The letter was an abomination. My stomach churned.

A chair shattered against the wall. I turned to see Blake's face was furious. I could feel the power rolling off him—barely contained and palpable.

"That fucking bastard." He raked his hands through his hair. "I pity her. I feel for Aryel, I truly do." He shook his head. "But how could she hide this from you? How could she let you grow up believing …"

"Wouldn't it have been worse?" Theo's voice was tired. "The truth is so much worse. Besides, she was right about one thing. My true father didn't want to claim me. He fucking hates me. I'm pretty sure he wouldn't care if I was dead."

Blake turned away, pacing like a caged animal. "I will kill him. Not someday. Not metaphorically. I will end Viktor."

I took a step toward Theo, placing my hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry. This is all horrific. What he did to your mother. What he did to you. But listen to me—none of this changes who you are. Not to yourself or to us."

Theo looked up at me, his eyes rimmed red. "You can't possibly mean that."

"I do," I insisted. "You are still the same Theo you've always been. You are brave and funny and loyal and a good friend."

"Loyal?" Theo shook his head. "How can you even say that after …"

"You did this to try to help Vaughn," I said firmly. "You wouldn't have shot Nyxaris, otherwise." I tried to laugh. "I think you know better than that."

Blake turned to his cousin. "She's right. Viktor doesn't get to rewrite your life just because he tells you this. You are not him. You never were and

you never will be." Blake's mouth twisted. "Look at me, Theo. I'm more like Viktor than I ever thought I'd be. The things I've done—"

"He made you do those things," Theo said, loyally. Then he stopped. "Oh."

"Exactly," Blake said, throwing up his hands.

"Viktor is very fucking good at getting people to do what he wants," I pointed out, "and what they do not want to do. You, Blake, your mother, who knows who else. But please, we can't do this right now. We can all fall apart later—together. Right now, Florence is gone. Viktor took her. He clearly planned this."

"What the hell happened to Nyxaris?" Blake demanded. "Surely he'd go straight after Florence."

"I … don't know if he'd have been able to," Theo hedged.

My blood ran cold. "What do you mean?"

Theo's face was troubled. "I mean, Viktor had me use the bolts Rodriguez gave us. But … he also gave me some others. I don't know what was on them. It was something new."

I swore under my breath.

"Did anyone see what happened to Nyxaris? Where he landed?" Blake demanded.

Theo shook his head.

"When?" I demanded, suddenly. "When did you even find time to do this? And how did Viktor even contact you in the first place?"

"Right before I fished Visha out of the water," Theo said guiltily. "Before you got there. You were so busy looking up at Blake." His face fell. "And as for Viktor … It started when he sent me a letter."

"Right." I'd been conveniently distracted. I shook my head thinking about the letter. What a wonderful first missive to receive from your long-lost father … who also happened to be your uncle. We would just have to save all that trauma to unpack with Theo later. "It doesn't matter. None of this matters. We need to help Florence, and we need to help Vaughn." I looked at Theo. "Do you have any idea where they could be?"

Theo hesitated. "I know where Vaughn might be, but I don't know if that's where Viktor will have taken Florence. One of the old Drakharrow manors inside the city wasn't destroyed in the … dragon attack. Viktor summoned me there when he gave me the bolts."

I glanced at Blake.

“It’s worth a shot,” he said quietly. “At the very least, maybe we can get Vaughn and his family to safety.” He was already moving to a chest in the corner that I knew was filled with weapons and armor.

I nodded numbly. In my mind, I was ten steps ahead. I was picturing pulling Florence to her feet, wrapping my arms around her. She had to be there. She had to be alive. She just had to.

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CHAPTER 25

BLAKE



The three of us headed into Veilmar. Our destination was a house in the city where Theo had once met Viktor; it was as good a starting place as any at this point. I wasn't a psychotic dragon this time. We'd decided bringing a dragon, even one who was not stable—well, not completely—was not the way to go. Not when we were headed right into a dense urban area. That had been easy to agree to, especially since the truth was that the thought of shifting again made me want to fucking puke. The thought of going into the city again made me feel that way, too, but I was keeping that to myself. Besides, I had no choice. Our friends were in danger, so I'd do what needed to be done.

We took a carriage into the city, had it drop us off at a safe distance, then walked. Veilmar looked different. Well, no shit, right? But I was seeing it for the first time since … well, since Vorago and I had laid it to waste. Whole streets were abandoned. Some blocks were nothing but rubble. Others still had buildings, but they were hollowed out and crumbling. Still others were completely untouched. The randomness of it made my stomach twist. One street burned while their neighbors lived. There'd been no logic or purpose to it, just Vorago's lunatic rage.

I'd had weeks to think about it, to piece together fragments of memory. How roofs had folded and towers had burned. And things much, much worse than that. But the most bizarre thing—even though I was seeing Veilmar for the first time since flying over it, and even though it was awful and the sights made me sick to my stomach—was that part of me was.… well, happy. Really happy. I was free. Pendragon was beside me. I could have skipped for joy, if I were the skipping type. But the fact that I was even imagining skipping? Sure, I guess it was messed up. Or did it make

perfect sense, considering how fucked up everything had been until just a few hours before? Now Vorago was gone, and there was a lightness in me that bordered on sheer euphoria. Despite Florence, despite Visha, despite Theo and Vaughn and Vaughn's family—I felt *happy*. I guess some irrational part of me was convinced that with Pendragon beside me, everything else would just magically fall into place.

We turned a corner. The town house rose at the end of the cul-de-sac, another Drakharrow property that I'd never known existed. Like the street around it, the town house had been grand once. But now the area had faded into middle-class obscurity. It was three times the size of the neighboring houses around it—lots of room for Uncle Viktor's evil deeds. The curtains were all drawn.

We walked up the street, keeping to the shadows and staying out of sight. This was easy since half the houses on the street looked abandoned. Pendragon glanced at me. I touched her hand; I knew she was sick with worry, so I made sure to keep the fucking smile off my face.

"I've been thinking about what you said," Theo suddenly said. "That Viktor doesn't get to rewrite my life. Being his … son … doesn't erase me. I'm still who I always was."

I nodded seriously. "You're still the idiot who thought starting a House Drakharrow theater club was a good idea."

Theo blinked, then snorted. "Shit, I'd forgotten about that."

Pendragon looked between the two of us. "Theater club?"

"You didn't know Bloodwing had its very own Theatrical Society of Venerable Players?" I asked her.

"Venerable?" Pendragon shook her head, a smile creeping onto her lips. "That does sound like a word Theo would use."

"You wound me, Medra. I have a large vocabulary, and I'm not afraid to use it. I won't be ashamed of that."

I couldn't help grinning. "Remember when you played Prince Ediphar in *The Hollow Crown of Phebes*?"

Theo made a strangled sound. "Bloodmaiden, how could I forget my debut. I was the son."

"Who kills his own father," I added helpfully.

"And marries his mother," Theo finished flatly. "Yes, thank you. A little too on the nose. One might even call it in poor taste, in hindsight."

I chuckled. Beside me, Pendragon laughed softly. The sound meant more to me than I could express. Proof that joy could still exist in the midst of all this ruin. It would take some time. But my cousin would be okay.

"I feel like I've let that side of myself waste away," Theo said quietly.

"In your defense, there's been a lot going on," I pointed out. I looked at Pendragon. "And we've all changed. It's not just you."

"You and Vaughn haven't had an easy time of it," Pendragon agreed. "Viktor made sure of that."

We were nearing the town house. "Here," I said, gesturing to the shadow of an alley. We fell quiet, eyes on the house. One guard stood outside.

"What if Viktor's in there?" Pendragon asked.

I didn't look away from the house. "Then, I stop pretending I'm civilized," I said lightly.

"Don't forget Viktor can do that, too," she reminded me. "But the last time …"

"The last time?"

"When Viktor became a dragon, his Inferni wasn't like yours," she said. "Kage said Viktor's dragon looked unhealthy. Possibly even infected."

"Infected?" I'd been a little too distracted to notice that.

She nodded. "Kage said there were black veins all over Viktor's wings."

"I don't know. Whatever Kage saw, Viktor seems to have recovered well enough," Theo said sourly.

"Maybe," Pendragon said consideringly. "But just because he managed to fly to grab Florence doesn't mean he's in prime condition. Kage was in his wolf form—he wounded Viktor. He says he saw more black veins covering his highblood body, too."

"Maybe it's not possible for Viktor to *be* infected like other highbloods," I said slowly, with a creeping sense of dread. "What if he's invincible?"

Theo shook his head. "No one is invincible. Not even that ancient piece of shit."

"I agree," Pendragon said. "I think …" She bit her lip.

"What?" I prodded.

"I think he's probably injured. Hiding how bad it is." She looked at us. "He needs Florence."

Theo swore. I felt ill. We all knew what she meant. The words were too horrific to say aloud. "I guess we should have seen this coming," I said slowly.

Pendragon was pale. “The question is, how fast could he do something like that? Does Florence have to be awake? Conscious? Does she have to give any kind of consent?”

“I don’t think consent is a prerequisite of soul-binding,” Theo said, looking sick.

“Right.” Pendragon took a deep breath. “Glad we’ve established that.” She looked at the town house. “So what’s the plan?”

The guard stationed outside the house had leaned back against the wall. He looked bored.

“What if there’s nothing there?” Pendragon said softly.

I squeezed her shoulder. “Then, we keep searching.” I looked over at the guard. “I’ll get him out of the way. Then you two join me.”

“No.”

I looked at Theo. He was stretching his arms. “I’ll take him,” my cousin said.

“No!” Pendragon and I both said at the same time. But it was too late. Theo stepped out into the street, shoulders back like he was walking onto a stage. He advanced a few paces until he reached the bottom of the stairs leading up to the entrance where the guard stood.

“Evening,” he called as he started walking up the stairs.

The guard came to attention. “Where the hell do you think you’re going? Fuck off.”

Theo gave the guard a smile drenched in Drakharrow arrogance. “I beg your pardon? Do you have any idea who I am?”

“Shit,” I whispered. “What’s he doing?”

“I don’t know, but at least he’s having fun,” Pendragon whispered back.

The guard was hesitating. “A Drakharrow?”

“Yes, my good man. And not just any Drakharrow either.” Theo had reached the top step now. His hands were in his pockets. He certainly didn’t look very intimidating. “I’m our dear Lord Drak-harrow’s favorite son.”

I smothered a cough.

My cousin leaned in toward the guard. “The name is Theo, Theo Drakharrow. And I’d like to see my father. Now.”

The guard shuffled his feet. “Lord Drakharrow isn’t here right now … my lord.”

Shit. I looked down at Pendragon.

Theo glanced our way, then looked up and down the street. “Then, let me in, and you and I can share a drink. I’ve a message for my father, and I’ll wait to deliver it.”

The guard hesitated. “Orders are orders. No one goes in or out.”

“So there is someone inside? Good to know.” Theo moved fast. His hands left his pockets and jabbed out once, twice.

The man pitched forward. Theo caught him before he hit the ground, then quickly fumbled for something on the guard’s body. A second later and he was unlocking the door with the guard’s key ring and dragging the body inside. Pendragon and I ran out of the alley. Inside the house, the door slammed behind us.

“Well,” Theo said, breathing hard, “that part was easy.”

“Nice move,” I said. “Sankara teach you that one?”

“No, it was from theater club,” he said sheepishly. “Only, then I was using stage props.”

Pendragon was already peering around. The house was dark and quiet, no guards waiting in the foyer or as far as we could see down the hall.

“Be quiet,” she hissed. She gestured. “We’ll go through the house floor by floor.”

Theo raised his hand. “Are we splitting up? Because I’ve read enough books—”

“No, we’re not fucking splitting up, Theo,” she snapped. “I’ve read enough books, too.”

We moved through the house together. The ground floor yielded nothing but dust. Same thing with the next two floors. The rooms were empty. We found a barren wardrobe, but other than that, not even a bed.

“Well, what a surprise,” Theo drawled. “Basement?”

I nodded. “Basement.”

At the back of the house, tucked behind what seemed like a pantry door, we found a wide stone staircase that stretched down into darkness. At the bottom of the stairs was a heavy iron door. Theo touched it, and runes lit up, glowing with a faintly reddish sheen.

“Well, that explains why he doesn’t need more guards,” Theo said. “Blood magic. It’s warded. No one can get past without offering blood.”

Pendragon wrinkled her nose. “*Any* blood? It can’t be that easy.”

“No,” he agreed. “Probably only Viktor’s.”

“Do you think Florence could be down there?” she asked quietly.

I stared at the iron door, feeling the pulse of blood magic. “I share Viktor’s blood. What happens if we try to break the wards?”

“Probably something bad.” Theo straightened up. “And I share more of it. I’m also better with blood magic than you are.” He started rolling up his sleeve.

“Theo,” I started to say. Then I thought better of it. He was right. “Fine.”

He was already drawing a blade across his palm. I watched as Theo pressed his hand to the iron door. Nothing happened. He closed his eyes, shoulders hunched. A few moments passed.

“What’s happening?” Pendragon whispered.

I didn’t take my eyes off Theo. “Blood magic is … weird,” I said quietly. “It’s not just about using blood, part of it is mental. It’s about intent and recognition.” I hesitated, trying to think of the right words. “He’s basically trying to talk to the wards.”

She frowned. “Talk?”

“Sort of ?”

She nodded.

The iron door groaned and started to swing open.

Theo’s eyes snapped open. “Go!”

We didn’t argue. Pendragon and I slipped through the widening gap, but then the door stopped. Theo was still on the other side.

“Fuck. Shit.” A pause. “I can’t move my hand from the bars.” Then a groan. “Shit, shit, shit.”

My hands were already around the edge of the iron door, trying to pull it farther open.

Pendragon slipped back to the other side. “Oh gods, this can’t be good.”

Theo sucked in a breath. “It’s … taking more blood. I can feel it. It feels … strange.”

Pendragon tried to yank Theo free as black veins began to crawl up his hand, moving up his skin in ugly, thin lines. The door groaned, metal flexing. I felt strength flow through me. I was a blooddamned fucking dragon. I might not be in dragon form right now, but fuck if I was going to let a simple door stop us. Vorago might be gone, but I was still a dragon.

Power answered me. The metal screamed. Theo screamed, too.

The door gave way, wrenching open with a clang and slamming back against the stone wall, just as the ward released Theo. He stumbled forward, gritting his teeth, as blood poured from his palm. Pendragon was already

ripping the sleeve off Theo's shirt, wrapping it tightly around his hand, and tying it off with shaking fingers.

"I'm fine," Theo said quickly. "It's fine." The black veins along his arm had faded. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"But, uh, yeah. That definitely set off some kind of alarm," he said. "We need to hurry."

"Of course it did," I muttered.

We turned around. The basement door had opened into a long stone chamber. Cells lined one side of the room. The other side seemed to be some kind of underground warehouse. Long metal tables were haphazardly shoved into the space, each one with ruined chains hanging off the edges.

I gagged. "What the fuck is that smell?" Blood, rot, and some sort of alchemical mixture all merged together in a horrific combination. Pendragon wasn't listening. She broke away from us and ran to one of the tables. A body lay there, chest carved open, legs half-covered with a sheet: a blightborn woman with dark eyes and long, dark hair.

I held my breath.

"It's not Florence," she called back to us.

I walked over. The poor woman had been dead for a while. Pendragon reached a hand down and gently closed the woman's eyes, then pulled the sheet over her.

We moved on, looking into each cell. The first ones were the worst. Dead bodies were piled carelessly, some half-skeletal. One cell was full of dwarves—and only dwarves.

"What kind of sick fucking experiments has Viktor been conducting?" I spat.

"Experiments, or just plain torture?" Pendragon said quietly.

The bodies were maimed, some burned. Some half-fucking-eaten. Which brought us to the next cell: It was full of infected highbloods. They looked like they were starving. Fresh-looking bones and the remnants of women's clothing littered the cell behind them. But clearly what they'd been fed hadn't been enough to go around. Silently they pressed against the bars weakly, reaching for us with trembling hands.

"Gods," Medra breathed, her hand to her mouth.

Then—

"Vaughn!" Theo shouted. He ran down the hall.

Vaughn Sabino was slumped against the bars of a cell up ahead. He looked bruised and dirty, but at least he wasn't missing any body parts. Not like the unfortunate dwarves in the other cell.

"Theo?" Vaughn's head snapped up. "I heard voices. I thought … Is it really you?"

Theo fell to his knees in front of the cell, his wounded hand forgotten. He pressed his hands through the bars. "I'm here. I've got you. I'm so fucking sorry."

Behind Vaughn, an older white-haired man lay on a narrow wooden bunk. His breathing was shallow. "My grandfather," Vaughn whispered, looking back at him.

"What about Grandma Mae? Where is she? Didn't they take her …?"

Vaughn was shaking his head. "She's gone," he said hollowly. "Your uncle … he took her away last night." He looked down the row of cells. "We could hear her screaming."

Theo looked up at Pendragon and me helplessly. There was no way I was going to tell Vaughn what we'd seen in that cell. I just prayed he wouldn't notice when we walked past.

Vaughn caught our expressions. "I know she's gone," he said with resignation. "We knew she had to be."

"We need to get you out of here," Theo said, already moving to unlock the cell with the guard's key ring.

"Vaughn, have you seen Florence?" Pendragon asked. She was walking down the row of cells, peering into each one.

"Florence?" Vaughn sounded surprised. "No. No one's been down here since yesterday."

Pendragon closed her eyes. "Right." She looked at me, her face strained.

"We found Vaughn," I said softly. "We'll find Florence, too." But we were running out of time.

Theo helped Vaughn lift his grandfather up from the bunk. I hung back as they brought him out of the cell. Pendragon had walked back to the large warehouse room. As the four of us moved back to the entrance to the room, she'd vanished. Then I saw an open door along the other side of the abandoned space, where we hadn't explored yet. I walked over and found Pendragon standing in a small room. Shelves packed with old books and papers lined the walls and a heavy desk stood in the center, its surface covered with papers. Pendragon was already rifling through them.

“These are records. Experiments. Viktor’s notes. Blake, some of these are recent.”

“Pendragon,” I said carefully, “we need to go.”

“There are notes about blightborn. About dragons.” She picked up a piece of paper and scanned it.

“We can’t stay here. We have to go.”

Theo appeared in the doorway. “Medra, someone will be coming. Vaughn’s grandfather is sick. We need to get them out.”

Pendragon’s hands went still. “I’m not leaving without these.”

I looked around the room and grabbed a worn leather bag that had been left on one of the shelves. “Fine. Here.”

She took it and started shoving the papers inside, sweeping everything off the desk with her arms and cramming it all in.

I reached for the bag as she went to lift it onto her shoulder. “Let me take that.”

She met my eyes. Her pain was seeping out. She couldn’t hide it any longer.

“I know,” I murmured. I touched her hair, then took a deep breath. “I also know you won’t want to hear this, but we need to sleep. You’re shaking. You’re exhausted.”

We slipped back out into the streets and hailed a carriage to take us back to Bloodwing.

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CHAPTER 26

REGAN



Hush now. Everything will be all right.

I woke up with his voice echoing in my head. I recognized the voice: I'd heard it before. The words had been gentle and unmistakably male. The presence had felt calm—but there was a strength behind it. It was the first good dream I'd had in weeks. The first I could remember at all since I'd been in this place. I hadn't been bothering to count the days. I supposed I could have been measuring time by the number of procedures they'd put me through, keeping track of every time someone said "Hold her still" or drew more of my blood or drugged me to sleep and then sliced me open. They wanted my blood because they wanted answers. But what was the question? No one had mentioned that.

I had a new room—well, it was a cell, really, but it wasn't in a dungeon. No, this was a clean, sterile room more like a healer's operating theater, brightly lit with lamps that never flickered or went out. The walls were pale, white stone. Terrified-looking servants came in to scrub the floor so often that it always smelled faintly of vinegar and antiseptic herbs. But nothing could ever completely cover the terrible smells that always lay beneath.

Along one wall stood shelves of instruments—neatly arranged, gleaming, and orderly. Hooks and knives. Bone saws and glass vials. Everything scrubbed perfectly clean between uses. For such a clean room, the dead dwarves were an unexpected eyesore. There were four of them right now, stacked carelessly in a cell. Sometimes they took one from the pile and tossed it into the other enclosure, then added a new one.

The other enclosure? It was filled with infected highbloods. They crowded together behind the iron bars, their eyes blank, their mouths gaping. Some weren't as far gone as the others. From time to time, they

pressed their faces to the bars as the scent of the corpses reached them, nostrils flaring as they inhaled hungrily. The infected would eat anything, including dwarves. It didn't have to be fresh.

Then there was the archway. It stood in a corner, like a window frame with no glass and no view. Tall and smooth and made of stone. It was the only thing in the room that wasn't completely horrible. It only seemed decorative, but it must have been important, because Viktor wasn't one to collect beauty for its own sake. Everything had to serve a dark purpose when it came to Viktor Drakharrow—everything and everyone.

On the far left side of the room stretched a wall of windows—tall glass doors framed in white that opened to the parapet outside. I could see the flagstones that covered the parapet from my cell. The stone railing. Part of a tower in the distance. The sky.

Freedom. So close it hurt.

The building was clearly some sort of highblood fortress, yet the room they were holding me in felt more like a hospital or an infirmary. Or a laboratory. Armed guards paced the halls and frequently checked to make sure I was still in my cell. Where else would I be?

Maybe the only bright side of all of this was that I hadn't seen Viktor in weeks. At least, I thought it was weeks. Whatever he wanted from me they hadn't figured out how to give it to him yet. I was lucky, really. I'd lived long enough with a monster to know that if Viktor Drakharrow was waiting for something, then it meant the worst part was still ahead.

I lay back on my cot and closed my eyes. I thought about the man's voice in my head. *Where are you?* the man in my dream had asked. I'd tried to show him. But there wasn't much to show. He'd said it was going to be all right. Of course, that was a lie. The voice probably wasn't a good sign. I was so desperate I'd started imagining things.

I turned over on the cot, trying to get comfortable despite the pain, when Viktor appeared. He'd *appeared*. He hadn't opened the door. He hadn't entered from another way. The room beyond my cell had been empty, but suddenly he was there. He carried a woman in his arms. He crossed the room without haste and laid his burden down on a long, narrow table. I froze—the woman was Florence Shen.

She was bound hand and foot, a cruel gag pressed between her bleeding lips. Her hair was tangled and wet. Everything about her was damp, as if

she’d ridden through rain or fallen in a lake. Her eyes were wide and terrified. She turned her head—and spotted me.

For a moment, we just stared at each other. I had a rough idea of how bad I must look: gaunt, scarred, bandaged. Oh, they bathed me, scrubbed my skin raw. Kept my hair brushed and my clothes changed. I wore a simple white shift now; the material was rough, but at least it was clean. I looked like what I was: the specimen in some horrible experiment. The sight of me didn’t seem to inspire much confidence in poor Florence. Recognition slowly dawned in her eyes, and then an even greater terror. She struggled against her bonds.

I pushed myself slowly to my feet and made my way over to the bars of my cell. The hardwood floor beneath my bare feet shone like polished glass. Then I slammed my hands against the cage. “Viktor!” My voice came out raw as I hadn’t really had to use it much the last few days.

He ignored me. He fastened Florence’s arms and legs to the table with leather straps and buckles, the way you might prepare someone before a healer’s procedure. That wasn’t a good sign.

I scanned the room, searching again. I already knew every inch of it. I already knew there was nothing I could use—at least, nothing accessible.

Viktor moved to a table near the instruments and started pulling things down off the shelves, most of them sharp.

I wrapped my hands around the bars and leaned my forehead against them. “Let her go, Viktor. She has a dragon. Nyxaris will be here any minute. Are you really up for that kind of a fight in your condition?”

He still wouldn’t look at me, he glanced instead at Florence. Her eyes were locked on mine, breathing shallow around the gag. I looked at that gag and felt so much pity for her. At least I could still speak. For now.

“Nyxaris will burn you to ash,” I went on. “Is that what you want? Whatever you planned to do with her, it’s not worth it. It’s too risky. You value your life more than anything, don’t you, Viktor?”

Viktor turned slowly. A smile spread across his ancient white face. “Why, Regan. Concerned for my welfare, are we?”

“Concerned for my own,” I snapped. “I don’t feel like tasting dragon fire.”

“More than you already have, you mean?” His eyes moved down to my legs half-covered with the remnants of the short gown.

I refused to look down, refused to flinch. He'd taken me back here that night, the night I'd tried to kill him. The night he'd nearly ripped my throat out. And he'd healed me so tenderly. Bandaging my throat, nursing me back to health. He'd healed me so he could break me.

The welts and burns up my inner thighs were proof of that. He'd wanted it to hurt even more when he … I closed my eyes.

"Nyxaris," Viktor said thoughtfully. "Yes, I'm counting on him. But I don't think he'll be a problem for very much longer. Besides, I'm quite confident that Nyxaris is currently out of commission."

My blood went cold. "What does that mean?"

His red eyes narrowed. "Tell me, Regan, are you truly upset that it's Florence Shen lying on this table? Or that it isn't Medra Pendragon?"

The name hit me like a bucket of ice water. "What?" I said unsteadily.

"Oh, it was meant to be her. All along." He shrugged. "I had planned for it to be the red-haired bitch, but I grew tired of waiting. And Blake's evolution was … quite inconvenient."

He meant Vorago; I assumed that Blake was dead, but I didn't really want to know, to be honest. I preferred thinking of him alive—him and Medra.

"But then this sweet, sweet girl …" His gaze drifted back to Florence. He walked over to her, then ran a hand down her stomach. Florence shuddered and sobbed around her gag.

"Get your filthy hands off her." I tried to rattle the bars of my cage, but they didn't actually move no matter how I shook them. Still, my chains clanged against them and made an impressively annoying sound.

"Sweet little Florence. Your rider traits have now fully taken hold." He reached down and fingered a strand of her hair. "Dark blue streaks. Hardly noticeable if one didn't know to look. And your ears, of course." He touched one, and I watched the girl try to shrink away, moving her head back and forth.

"You don't need her," I snapped. "You're already a fucking dragon."

The word seemed to get his attention. He moved. Fast. One moment he was at the table by Florence's side and the next he was in front of my cage. His hands shot through the bars, seizing my chains and yanking me forward. My skull cracked against the bars and stars burst behind my eyes. I felt warm blood trickle down my temple.

"You dare," Viktor roared, his red eyes inches from mine, "to speak to me about dragons?" His voice echoed off the walls, sending the infected

highbloods shrieking. On the table, Florence thrashed against her bonds in terror, her eyes never leaving mine. “You nearly destroyed me, you little bitch.” His spittle struck my face. “You nearly broke me. You and that Avari dog.”

My heart hammered. Up close, I saw what I’d missed before. The black veins that had once covered his dragon wings now crossed his highblood skin, webbing over his thin ancient face like black lines through white marble.

I smiled, tasting blood. “Are you dying, Viktor?”

His grip tightened. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I gagged, my fingers clutching at his wrist. Finally he let go. I slid to the floor, leaning against the bars, laughing weakly as I wiped blood and spit from my face. “You are, aren’t you? That’s why you’re so desperate you’d risk Nyxaris’s wrath.” Florence stared at me, eyes bright with terror. I held her gaze. “Nyxaris will come. He will tear this place apart.” I closed my eyes and whispered to myself, “And I’ll be glad.”

Viktor pretended he couldn’t hear me. He moved back to Florence and brushed her hair from her face, then reached down and loosened one of her restraints. Florence made a muffled cry as her arm was freed, straining her body away from him. But it was pointless.

I rattled my chains against the bars. “Don’t touch her. You want blood? Take some more of mine.”

He ignored me. A blade flashed. Florence moaned as a line of red blossomed across her skin. Viktor caught the blood carefully in a vial.

“Who is it?” I demanded. “Who are you binding, me to her? You to her? Which is it?” I shook my head. “I won’t let you do this. You’ll have to kill me.”

He looked over at me, smiling slowly. “You’re truly under the illusion that I would require your consent?” He laughed. “After all you’ve been through, I would have thought you’d be wiser than that by now.”

I closed my eyes. “So which is it?”

“Why just one? Why not both?”

“Both?” I looked at him, perplexed. “What?” I whispered.

His red eyes gleamed. “You broke a Blood Vow, and yet you still don’t understand the significance of what you really told me. What you revealed to me about that Avari dog.”

I thought of Kage—then quickly wished I hadn't. Remembering him, thinking about him was too painful. I clenched my jaw. "You only know he's a wolf," I said dully. "What does it matter?"

He'd gotten away, that's what mattered. I'd saved Kage. I'd done all I could. I'd given … everything I had. My hope of saving Persis. My freedom. Now it looked like even my life. And I'd do it again. In a heartbeat. Even though it hadn't turned out the way I'd expected it to.

Viktor's smile was all too genuine. I shifted uncomfortably. "Stop fucking smiling, you asshole."

"That wolf should have died at my hands. I left him there, bleeding out and ruined." He paused while I seemed to be holding my breath. "Yet my sources tell me he somehow lives."

My heart sped up.

"His bitch of a grandmother has not been found, however. If she is truly dead, then every Avari with power will listen to him. Through him, through you, I can force their entire house into docility."

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"You broke a Blood Vow. You should have died. Do you not realize what it means that you did not? You were my consort, but apparently you are the Avari dog's whore." He gave a horrible, deep-throated laugh. "And you are his *mate*." The word echoed.

I stared, not understanding. Then Kage's words to me on the cliff one night hit me. *When a wolf finds his true mate, he knows.* A chill went through me. I hadn't asked to be Kage's mate. I hadn't agreed to anything like that. But when our blood had mixed … when we'd made the vow … I thought of the feeling of our blood mixing, as if his very soul was sliding into my body. Like fire racing straight from his veins to mine. I touched my palm, tracing the place where the scar had faded. Was there still some part of Kage inside me, marking me as his mate? Some part of me that could be used to control him?

My eyes lifted. "Tell me, then. Tell me your plan." I rattled my chains. "After all, who am I going to tell? If I'm your link to Kage, then Florence __"

"She will become my leash to the Duskdrake. She is bound to the dragon, and he is bound to her. He must answer to the girl. Through her, he will answer to me."

“That’s impossible—both me and Florence? You can’t merge your soul with two others. I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

He looked back at me. “And because you have never heard of a thing means it does not exist, is that it? You ignorant slut of a girl.” I hardly flinched. I’d become used to the crude put-downs. Not very imaginative ones either.

Viktor looked down at Florence. “Now, Miss Shen here may understand better. There are far more things in heaven and earth than we can imagine. Terrible, terrible things.” His smile was a skeletal grimace. “Isn’t that right, Miss Shen?” Florence stared up at him mutely. “In any case,” Viktor went on, “I need not bind three souls together. I have read such things have been done before—though, rarely successfully. But no, it is not a risk I am willing to take. Two soul-bindings are enough.”

“Two?” I stared at him. “But you just said …”

There was movement outside the room. Footsteps. Then a soft, submissive female voice.

“Did you call for me, Father?”

I stared in shock as Elowyn Wispwood stepped into the room. This wasn’t the first time I’d seen her here, I realized. She’d been the woman I’d almost recognized the other day, the one who’d held me down and fastened my restraints.

Viktor gestured to the other table. “It is nearly time. Come in.”

For a moment, I just stared, my mind refusing to understand. The professor of magic’s pale hair was pulled back into a neat chignon. Her hands were folded in front of her over a simple black skirt. Her posture was calm, her face intelligent and thoughtful. There was nothing there to suggest she was secretly a psychopath like Viktor. Nothing to suggest that there was any resemblance between them at all.

“What the fuck,” I said hoarsely.

Elowyn’s eyes found mine. There was intelligence there, yes, but fear, too—yet, behind it a brittle resolve. I’d taken her Magical Foundations class. Professor Wispwood always seemed like a woman who was confident in her abilities within the classroom but far more deferential once she left it. Still, she’d never given a hint of being the kind of person who craved power in the way Viktor did. But then, she was half-blightborn. Halfborns had even less privilege than the average blightborn did. I tried to imagine what

it must be like to be born so powerless. Maybe it was a little like what I'd been feeling these last few weeks, trapped and alone in my cell.

"Hello again, Regan," Professor Wispwood said quietly. "I'm glad to see you're feeling better."

I laughed, then turned to Viktor. "I thought you'd never sired children. I thought that was why you wanted me."

He smiled thinly. "I rarely recognize my offspring openly. None have ever been completely satisfactory. Elowyn is halfborn, yes. Her blood is tainted and low. Yet she survived birth despite her mother's base bloodline. And she was bold enough to volunteer to assist me. She seeks to prove herself."

Viktor gestured for Elowyn to lie down on one of the other two tables. "You will serve as the vessel for Elowyn's soul. Through you, her influence—and thus my influence—will extend outward and into the wolf. Elowyn will be his mate in your place."

A chill slid down my spine. "That bitch is not stealing my body. It's a fucked-up plan, and it will never work. Even if you were right about Kage being my mate—which you aren't—he isn't blind. He won't accept any of this."

"He will have no choice. He has already been blinded. He bound his blood to yours. I assume he did so without even understanding what he had done. Do you realize how powerful the act was?" Viktor's eyes narrowed. "Or how deep his treachery? You were *my* consort."

I shivered. The only good part of this was that somehow Viktor didn't seem to be my archon anymore.

"You were both stupid fools, blind to your folly. But your pathetic accident has proven a boon. Now, through you, I will hold court over all the Avari. Oh, how I will soften their fangs."

I swallowed. I didn't think this was going to work. What made Viktor think my supposed bond with Kage would even survive Elowyn's soul being transferred into my body? No, the most likely outcome was that I'd die. Elowyn probably would, too. But Florence didn't have to.

I swallowed. "Fine, use me. But let Florence Shen go. If you do that, I'll cooperate. I won't fight you."

Viktor turned to Florence, looking down at her body with a hunger that went far beyond mere lust. "I think not. Miss Shen is far too useful to waste

on your mercy. Did you hear nothing I said? She is a door I will walk through."

I stared at him, horrified. "Do you mean—?"

He gave a dry laugh. "I shall not leave my own body. No, I have not endured for centuries nor paid in blood and suffering just to trade my hard-won form for a lowly blightborn girl's." He glanced at Florence again, his expression appraising. "She will be a conduit. A living conduit. I will bind my soul to hers. She will speak. But it will be my voice that selects the words. She will go where I wish, do as I wish. Through her, I will have the dragon leashed." He tilted his head. "Do you understand the elegance of it, Regan? I will gain a Duskdrake as easily as if I had hatched him myself."

I swallowed. "But your body is damaged. Your dragon—"

"Yes, you and the Avari made sure to see to that, didn't you?" he snapped, suddenly furious again. He looked down at his hands where black veins pulsed beneath the pale skin. "I will not abandon what I am. I will not give up my fangs." He smiled thinly at me. "Have no fear, Regan. I assure you, I will outlive you all."

I looked over at Elowyn, lying placidly on the other table, her hands clasped peacefully, eyes fixed on the ceiling. Bitter bile rose in my throat. "Why do any of this? What is it for? To rule Sangratha? You already have all the power. Everyone worships you. You command every highblood. Isn't that enough?"

"Enough?" His voice was sharp. "Even now, they seek to pry power from my hands. The Avari threaten to rise up, to overthrow all that I have built. Enough? You believe Sangratha is the limit of my dreams?"

I didn't really want to think about Viktor Drakharrow dreaming. "I don't understand."

"No, you don't. Few can comprehend true greatness. My goals are far larger than one realm. Even now, Marcus and Catherine work valiantly at the northern border on a quest to expand high-blood power into other lands."

I wasn't exactly surprised to hear he was working with Blake's asshole older brother. But other lands? I shook my head, not understanding.

He looked at me with impatience. "Many ages ago, Sangratha was severed from its home world. Cut off from many sources of great power. But with Marcus and Catherine's help, I will transform this world. Realms shall bleed together. Creatures once banished will return again. Highblood

power will flow like an unstoppable tide. And I will stand at the forefront of it all with those who were loyal to me by my side. Highblood conquerors and our dragon slaves, riding across a frontier rich in blood and fear."

"Sounds wonderful," I said sarcastically. "Not like the world is fucked up enough already. And the dwarves?" I pointed at the pile of corpses in the corner. "How the fuck do those poor people fit into all of this?"

The dwarves had always been separate from Sangratha; they didn't get involved in highblood affairs. The closest they came was sending some of their youths to attend Bloodwing. It didn't always go very well for the ones who came aboveground to study. I remembered Medra Pendragon's dwarven friend who'd been killed in the Consort Games after the Crown of Bone was placed on Medra's head. The crown hadn't been my idea—my father and Viktor had pushed me to make the request to Headmaster Kim. If I'd known one of Medra's closest friends would be killed because of the crown, would I have done it? The old Regan probably still would have, but the new Regan, the one who at some point in the last few months had started feeling something deeper than skin level? I liked to think she would have made a different choice.

His eyes darkened. "Long ago, the dwarven kingdom stole something they had no right to." He looked over at the dwarven corpses and scowled. "Whatever happens, I will have my revenge—and I will finally take back what is mine."

I cocked my head. "Do you hear that? I think I hear wings. Is that Nyxaris landing?"

Viktor looked at me coldly. "Very amusing. Entertain yourself with false hope for the few minutes you have left." He moved toward my cage, key already in hand.

"Shit," I whispered. Was this really it? On the table, Florence's dark eyes looked back at me—silent and helpless. The lock fell to the ground. My cell door creaked open.

Viktor didn't know what it meant to be gentle. He hauled me over by the hair, dragging me out of the cell. My feet scrambled against the wooden floorboards. I gasped, choking as he yanked my head hard, pulling me past the shelves of instruments and the books and the cages of infected highbloods, toward the third table on the far side of the room … until my eyes landed on something. Something I must have seen at least a hundred times a day. A wall sconce. The lamp inside burned with oil.

My heart sped up. What would be better? To live as a slave or to burn alive? Neither seemed like great choices.

I thought of Viktor's hands on my body. I thought of him touching Florence. I took a breath, then twisted. A split second later, Viktor pulled hard, but it was too late—I'd already grabbed the lamp. I tossed it down with everything I had. Glass shattered, and oil spilled across the floor. Instantly, a blaze of fire leaped up.

Outside on the parapet, a sound cut through the room as the flames danced over the floorboards. Not the roar of a dragon but the howl of wolves.

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CHAPTER 27

MEDRA



There was a fire already burning in the hearth when we returned to Blake's room. We'd helped Theo get Vaughn and his grandfather to the House Orphos infirmary. Then we'd checked on Visha. She'd been asleep, but the healers told us she was doing well. Most people, Healer Elycia reminded us, didn't live long enough to be treated for dragon-fire injuries. I knew Blake was beating himself up inside for having harmed Visha. I also knew he was smart. He knew it had been Vorago, not him.

I crossed the room, bypassing the bed. "If you think I'm going to sleep right now, you're insane," I shot over my shoulder as Blake closed the door behind us. I sank down onto the rug in front of the fireplace and dumped the leather satchel's contents out onto the floor. Loose notes, folded sheets of parchment, diagrams, and a few books tumbled out.

"I wouldn't dream of trying to get you into bed, Pendragon," Blake murmured, sinking into an armchair near me. His lips were twitching, but I saw worry there, too.

"What do you think Nyxaris will do when he finds out Theo shot him?" Blake asked.

"I don't know," I said, trying to sort through the mess. "Kill him, probably. If Nyxaris is even still alive."

"I doubt a few bolts would be enough to take out that dragon." He was trying to keep his voice light, but I saw his hands clench on the arms of the chair. I knew he was worried about his cousin.

"We'll help Theo explain. It will be all right," I said, trying not to sound too distracted. "Even dragons have to forgive sometimes."

"Nyxaris lost his rider because of Theo. I'm not sure he'll see that as forgivable."

My head shot up. “He hasn’t lost her. She isn’t dead, she’s missing.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Blake said. “You really should sleep. How long have you been awake for?”

“Fuck off, Drakharrow. Florence is out there somewhere. I’ll sleep once we’ve found her.” I looked up at him. “You love Theo, right?”

“Of course. I’d do anything for him.”

“Well, I feel the same way about Florence. She’s been my best friend since I got here. She’s more than a friend to me—she’s my sister.”

Blake’s expression softened. “I know, Pendragon. Believe me, I know how much she means to you. And I’m here. I’ll help you, however you need.” He stifled a yawn, then looked apologetic.

But it was my turn to be sorry. “You’ve been through a lot today. You’re the one who probably needs some rest.”

“You mean stabbing me in the heart and doing a dark-magic ritual with a fluffin didn’t take much out of you, huh?” Blake joked.

I tried to smile, but I was distracted by the parchment I was holding. “He was documenting himself.”

“Who?”

“Viktor.” My heart quickened a little. “His injuries, his limitations.”

Blake perked up. “What kind of limitations?”

I flipped the page “All of them. Apparently your dear old uncle hasn’t been feeling quite himself for some time. He’s been healing more slowly.” I looked up at Blake. “What you did to him in the Black Keep …”

He nodded. “He’s still wearing the scars.” Blake touched a hand to his face, to the eye that had eventually regenerated.

“Whereas you healed—completely.” I looked back down at the page. “Viktor’s been wounded for a long time. Not just from you.” I rifled through the pages at my feet, trying to find the one that came next in the sequence. “Aha!” I grabbed at a sheaf. “It’s impacted his ability to shift. He’s experiencing instability.” I kept scanning. “It’s been going on for decades.”

“That explains why he hasn’t simply ruled Sangratha as its only living dragon, even before Nyxaris woke up.”

I nodded. “Yes. He couldn’t rely on his ability to transform. Even now, he only turns when he feels he has no other choice.” I flipped the page. “He can only hold his Inferni form briefly. Sometimes just for minutes. It costs him a lot, too. He loses strength.”

“Well, that explains how sickly he looked,” Blake remarked. “The black veins Kage saw, right?”

“Right,” I said excitedly, still skimming. “Nyxaris damaged his wing that night, and he recorded the injury. Severe tearing to the base of the right wing. Significant damage caused by the *Avari dog*.”

Blake snorted. “I guess that’s Kage.”

I flipped through the next few pages. “He’s been tracking his wounds obsessively. Like he’s afraid of what they mean.”

“So he’s not invincible,” Blake murmured. “Thank the Blood-maiden.”

“The Bloodmaiden,” I repeated. I frowned. “He thinks she’s connected to the Veil.”

“What?”

“There are notes here, about the Veil,” I said, my heart rate increasing. “He wants the Veil brought down. He’s been working with Marcus and Catherine.”

Blake was frowning. “How? The Bonewood is on the other side of Sangratha.”

“I don’t know, but clearly they have some way of communicating. This doesn’t make any sense.”

“Power over other worlds without dragons? Of course it does.”

“But he also thinks what they’re doing to the Veil is … damaging him somehow. Hurting his ability to shift even more.”

“The black veins? Is the Veil feeding that corruption, just like we see in infected highbloods?”

“That’s his theory, too,” I said, reading faster. I flipped to the next page. “Shit.”

“What is it?”

“This is just a record of experiments he conducted on prisoners. He was trying to analyze the source of the plague.” I read on in case there was something useful. “He believes the plague was caused by the Veil. It doesn’t follow a normal pattern of infection. It comes in waves, and there are random occurrences that can’t be traced back to a bite or anything like that. He thinks it’s magic-based, not biological.”

“Didn’t you say Florence theorized the same thing?”

“She did,” I said absent-mindedly. I put down the stack of papers and picked up something new, a worn notebook encased in leather.

“I found a journal of Viktor’s once in the Black Keep,” Blake commented. “The old bastard must have notes and files all over the place.”

“Guess that makes sense when he’s been alive hundreds of years,” I murmured. “Lots of time to make notes.”

“Pendragon, you get what this means, right?” Blake spoke with reluctance.

I looked up at him.

“Viktor didn’t take Florence because he’s strong,” he said quietly. “He took her because he’s weak—and desperate. He thinks he’s running out of time.” Blake hesitated, like there were words on the tip of his tongue but he didn’t want to say them out loud.

“He wants to soul-bind her and use her body. I know.” Saying the words was excruciating. “But these notes …” I looked at the pile. “He’s meticulous. He’s methodical. He believes in experimentation. He’s a scientist.” I hated to think Florence and Viktor had something in common. I wanted to dismiss Viktor as simply a madman. He was certainly a lover of pain and brutality. But despite how insane his plans might seem to us, there was at least some logic and method to them. “He won’t move too quickly, because if he fucks something up it could cost him his life. And we know he values that more than anything.” Blake nodded. I took a deep breath. “So we might have some time.” I closed my eyes.

“You mean,” Blake said slowly, “time while Viktor is … experimenting on Florence?”

I clenched my jaw. “And probably torturing her. Basically, yes.”

Blake ran his fingers through his hair. “Fuuuck.”

“We’re leaving here as soon as I have an idea of where we should go,” I said distractedly. “I think this is a journal. You should get some sleep.”

“I think that’s easier said than done.” But he closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair, stretching his long legs out. “Whose journal?”

“Not sure yet. Probably Viktor’s,” I mumbled. But the handwriting was different. I flipped through, checking some of the dates. They went back about fifteen years. I started reading.

I caught a passing mention to the end of the civil war. The author wrote about a program of balance and restraint, about the dangers of excess. My breath hitched. This didn’t sound like Viktor. It sounded like someone else. Someone I’d never met but whose name had come up a lot since I’d arrived in Sangratha: Blake’s father. He’d been called the Peacebringer because

he’d united the four great houses, brought back the regency, and basically called on the highbloods to stop fucking murdering blightborn quite so blatantly and show some restraint. I’d heard a lot about him. Supposedly he’d been a highblood who was guided by moral clarity, who wanted greater protections for the blightborn because it was right. I remembered thinking once that Blake was nothing like his father, this idealized Peacebringer.

I glanced at Blake. His eyes were still closed. Now I knew better. Blake was a lot like his father: They both wanted a better Sangratha—a gentler one.

I turned back to the journal. I was surprised that some of the entries didn’t exactly glow with mercy. Instead, the writing was cold and pragmatic. I flipped to another entry, and my stomach did a somersault.

Highblood appetites cannot continue unchecked no matter how great a part of our culture the need to hunt and feed may be, because the blightborn population has plateaued. The research we’ve been conducting shows that in certain regions, it is actively declining. Highblood restraint is not a matter of sentiment. It is arithmetic.

My stomach sank as I read on.

The predator cannot exist without prey. If a few generations must suffer so that our Pure Blood race can go on, it is a small price to pay. We must curb the hunt. Not because it is cruel—for no one may truly expect a lion to restrain from devouring a lamb. But because it is, quite simply, unsustainable.

I swallowed hard.

“Whatcha reading now?” Blake asked sleepily.

My head whipped up. His eyes were still closed. “Um, nothing interesting.” I turned the page.

Blood taken from thralls sustains life, but the nutrient yield is lower—measurably so. Blood taken willingly provides diminished returns. Less potency, less enhancement of highblood ability. Still, it is sufficient to preserve life. Feeding between highbloods—in the case of mates, for instance—is irrelevant. Such feeding is for pleasure and bonding, but does not meaningfully increase power or extend healing or longevity in most cases. By contrast, blood taken in the thrill of a hunt produces heightened effects …

There it was. Did I have to read any more? This was it. The truth about the Peacebringer’s supposed compassion. It was all a great big lie. Alexander Drakharrow hadn’t really been trying to save blightborn. He’d been trying to save highbloods.

I turned another page before I could stop myself.

Viktor is furious. He sees my proposals as capitulation. He calls it weakness. He says a predator who refuses to hunt deserves extinction. He argues dominance is the highblood birthright and fear is the mechanism by which order between superior and inferior species is maintained.

My fingers tightened on the page.

"What is it?" Blake was sitting up. His eyes were open.

I looked up at him. "Nothing."

He narrowed his eyes. "It's not nothing. I can tell by your face." He held out his hand. "Give me the book. Let me see."

I hesitated.

"Pendragon, it can't be that bad. I can read, too, you know. Pass it over."

Mutely, I did as he asked. I watched his face as he read. Watched him read, then frown. "Whose journal is this?"

"I think it might be your father's."

His hands froze on the page for a moment. Then he flipped to the next one. He stopped. "These entries … I was a child when this was written."

I swallowed. "Yes."

Blake clenched his jaw. Then he closed the book slowly.

"Just … put it down," I said softly. I stood up and went over to him, then sat down on his lap and leaned my head against his chest. Slowly, his arms moved to clasp me. His head rested on top of mine. We sat like that for a while, our eyes closed. Not sleeping, just thinking.

"I idolized my father," Blake finally said. "Thought he was a highblood hero."

"I don't think you're alone in believing that," I said softly. Just when I'd thought I was starting to understand the kind of place Sangratha was, I learned something worse.

"He built an entire moral framework on survival math," Blake said. "Why not just tell everyone the truth?"

"That there was going to be a blightborn shortage? That their precious blood supply might be threatened?" I shook my head against him. "He must have known he couldn't do that. There might be a panic. Things might have gotten even worse."

"For highbloods and blightborn."

I shuddered. "Probably especially for blightborn." I pictured highbloods rioting as they realized that first of all, the blightborn population was

strangely shrinking and secondly, they really did get more power from when they slaughtered us like animals.

“We can’t stay here,” Blake said at last. “But where do we go? Did you get any ideas from what you were reading about where Florence could be?”

“No,” I said, my voice small. “But you’re right. I can’t just go to sleep and do nothing.”

At any other time, resting my head on Blake’s chest and enjoying a moment of peace with him would have been more than enough. But with Florence in danger, I couldn’t rest. I didn’t deserve a moment of peace. Not while she …

There was a knock at the door. Blake stiffened instantly.

“I’ll get it.” I was already standing. I crossed the room and opened the door. A highblood man stood in the hall. He was dressed simply and looked to be in his midthirties, but with highbloods looks were always deceiving. He wasn’t a student. And while there was an air of authority to the man, I knew he wasn’t a professor. I’d never seen him at Bloodwing before.

Then I noticed his eyes, a rich golden amber. I’d only seen eyes like that once before. I gripped the doorframe.

The man smiled faintly, like he knew exactly what I must be thinking. “I was hoping it would be you who answered. May I come in? We need to talk.”

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CHAPTER 28

KAGE



Viktor Drakharrow might have been the most powerful high-blood in the land. He was certainly the longest-lived. But that didn't mean he was the wisest or the most intelligent. Power must rot the mind as surely as it preserved the body. For instance, he'd been foolish enough to take Regan with him. And he'd been stupid enough not to strengthen the fortress he was hiding her in—it was minimally guarded. The outer gates had fallen almost immediately. A handful of guards easily overtaken, poorly prepared, obviously not expecting an attack. Certainly not one from a pack of wolves. They'd had just enough time to scream before the wild pack I'd brought with me tore out their throats. The pack had answered my call without question, their minds brushing against mine like faint sparks. I'd sent half of them into the main building, while the others followed Lysander and me along the exterior.

We'd found a healer and nurse crossing the courtyard. They'd frozen at the sight of us, mouths agape in terror. It hadn't taken much persuading to get them to tell us where Regan was being kept; the truth had poured out of them like blood.

Now Lysander crouched beside me on the parapet, his coat snapping in the wind. Usually, he smelled calm, but right now I could sense his excitement was barely leashed. Ahead of us stretched a row of tall glass doors. We had a clear view into the room that lay beyond. I caught sight of the flames, and so did the wolves around us. Their hackles rose as they saw the fire and smelled the smoke. Fire meant pain and panic. I spoke to them, mind to mind, trying to quell their fear.

"There," Lysander said quietly.

Regan was in the midst of the fire. Her feet were bare, her face was pale. Her skin seemed stretched far too tight over her slender bones. She had an arm around a smaller dark-haired woman, helping her rise from a long metal table. Leather straps dangled loose behind them. They turned toward the windows and I saw who Regan was helping: Florence Shen. Behind them, Viktor Drakharrow stood, bellowing orders to guards who were tramping into the room. Everyone seemed focused on the fire and in their haste to put it out had become distracted—everyone but Regan. She moved steadily toward the parapet, propping Florence up at her side. Her jaw was set. But a wall of flames blocked the women's path.

"Let's go." Lysander rose to his feet, pulling out his blade as the wolves growled. They hated fire, but I knew they would do what had to be done.

We crashed through the windows into the room, sending shards of glass flying. The fire barred Lysander's path, but a wolf could go where he could not. As Lysander and the wild wolves moved around the edge of the fire toward Viktor and the guards, I bolted forward. Glass crunched under my pads as I leaped over the wall of flame. I landed hard on the other side, paws scrabbling, in front of the two fleeing women. In an instant, I'd taken in Regan's appearance. Her wrists were still bound in heavy chains. The iron had dug deep into the skin, rubbing it raw and leaving it chafed and bloody. She was otherwise clean; Viktor's underlings had tried to scrub their violations from her skin. But I could see the scars and barely healed cuts peeking from beneath the short white gown she wore. Fresh blood trickled down her forehead. Her lips were split, her cheeks bruised and swollen. I sniffed the air, smelling the scent of charred flesh—she'd been burned as well. She smelled of old blood and new, of fear and fire, and underneath it all, the sickening scent of *him*.

Behind the two women, I caught the flash of Lysander's blade and heard a guard scream as he fell. The wolves were tearing the other guards apart in a storm of fur and snapping teeth and bones. I heard Viktor roar with fury as he caught sight of the women through the flames. Then Lysander was on him. Metal flashed.

"Fuck," I heard Regan say. I looked and saw Florence had sagged against her.

Regan looked at me, then at the flames. I stared back at her, hoping she understood what she had to do. She nodded and moved to lift Florence onto my back. But before she could shift the other girl's weight, someone else

was there. A woman had pushed through the blaze, her skin blistering, eyes wild. Now she shrieked and grabbed at Florence. I glanced at Regan. *What the fuck was Professor Wispwood doing here?*

It didn't matter. I growled and leaped, catching her by the shoulders as she tried to pull Florence away. My jaws closed and I shook her—hard. Then I let go. Wispwood flew through the air, hitting the base of a stone arch that sat in one corner of the room, her body making a wet, squelching sound as it landed. In a heartbeat, Regan climbed onto my back and half lifted, half dragged Florence up beside her. A moment later I was running toward the flames.

"Oh shit, oh shit," Regan muttered as I gathered myself. I felt her hunch down, pulling Florence's prone body with her.

I jumped over the wall of fire. Heat tore at my fur as we cleared the flames. I landed, skidding on broken glass, then bounding through the shattered windows and onto the parapet outside. As Regan slid down with Florence, I turned back. More guards had arrived; Lysander was surrounded. Almost all of the wolves who had entered with him were down. I could make out their broken, bloody shapes. Some burned. Only one remained—a she-wolf, the leader of the pack. She snarled and snapped, guarding Lysander's side. I growled low as I watched a guard plunge a sword into the wolf's flank. She let out a high-pitched whimper and sank to the floor.

"You have to go back for him," Regan whispered.

I turned to her.

She nodded. "Go." She crouched beside Florence, holding the girl's head in her lap.

I growled again, hoping she understood the sound for what it was—a vow that I would return quickly—then I headed back to the burning fortress. I raced into the room, skirting the ring of flames. Lysander's blade flashed. His left arm was wounded, and he held it stiffly at his side. I snarled and leaped, catching the guard whose steel was about to fall against Lysander's sword before it could come down, ripping him apart before flinging his body against the wall. Two more came at me, blades glinting.

"Kage!" Lysander shouted.

I looked to see Viktor Drakharrow slipping across the room. There was no hesitation. I slashed the two guards with my claws, then sprang, launching across the burning floor, glass and embers tearing at the pads of

my paws. Viktor sensed me a fraction too late. He turned, one hand coming up, as I hit him like a ballista bolt. My weight drove him down, and we crashed to the floor together. My jaws clamped down around the back of his skull, teeth biting through skin and hair. Old blood flooded my mouth, corrupted and wrong. I gagged.

Viktor went slack beneath me. Every instinct was screaming for me to finish it. To crush and tear and rend while I had the chance. But Lysander screamed my name, and I looked up.

Elowyn Wispwood was on her feet at the parapet. She'd scrabbled her way there and stood with her hands buried in Regan's hair as she shoved her back against the low stone wall.

Regan screamed. Lysander was shouting my name. I released Viktor and ran, faster than I'd ever run before, muscles burning. Elowyn Wispwood shoved, Regan's body tipped backward, and I dove forward, knowing I wasn't going to be fast enough, waiting for her body to fall. But it didn't.

Lysander reached the parapet wall in a blur of motion. His hands were raised, fingers splayed wide. His wounded hand shook with effort. Regan's body froze in midair, suspended. Sweat poured down Lysander's face. "I can't—" His teeth were clenched, his arms shaking. "I can't hold her."

I sprang. As the flagstones and the fire vanished behind me, I saw Elowyn Wispwood behind Lysander's back—her hands closing around Florence, dragging her back into the burning room … where Viktor Drakharrow was already beginning to rise. I caught Regan in my jaws. We tumbled in midair, falling together. The ground rushed up to meet us.

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Book 2
Summerfell

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CHAPTER 29

NEVILLE



The fluffin was a creature of many talents. Being furry and adorable meant he was almost always appreciated but also underestimated. Being unnoticed was a skill all fluffins possessed. It wasn't invisibility, more a way of blending in with the world, like how a shadow is taken for granted.

Neville padded through the passages beneath the castle. The air grew cooler as he carefully selected the archway that bore the engraving of a crescent moon and entered the tomb of bones. He was following a target, one who was quite skilled in stealth, though perhaps not quite as skillful as she believed. At least, not when it came to detection by fluffin noses.

Enormous skulls filled alcoves along the sides of the chamber as Neville walked, each belonging to an ancient Duskdrake, their horns twisted in elegant, ivory spirals. Once those horns had inspired terror. The dragons' teeth were longer than some swords. Some of the skulls were so large the fluffin could have comfortably curled up within a single eye socket. But there was nothing terrible about them to the fluffin. Dragons and fluffins had long been in harmony. Fluffins enhanced dragons. If one were to dig back in the history books, they might find studies in which scholars were hard pressed to understand what fluffins were gaining from the bargain. Some had speculated that fluffins were naturally compassionate creatures. They recognized a need in dragons and filled it. In turn, they gained protection and respect from an apex predator. This may have explained why, when dragons ceased to thrive, so too did fluffins. Few knew the truth. That, in fact, it had been the other way around.

Neville reached the last passage of bones. There was an opening at the end, leading to a staircase that led down into darkness. Someone was

already on the stairs. Neville padded silently after her, waiting until he was on the stairs and just a step behind. “Woof!”

The woman yelped, jumping nearly a foot into the air, and spinning around with a speed that was impressive for someone of her age. “Bloody, blasted beards!”

Neville’s tongue lolled with pleasure. He thumped his tail once against the steps, then sat to show he meant no harm.

Magda Stonefist stared down at him, her fist still clenched around the hilt of the dagger on her belt. “Little furry bastard.” But there was admiration in the dwarf’s dark blue eyes.

Neville gave an enthusiastic yelp.

“Oh, you think so, do you? And what makes you think I’ll allow it?” She scratched her beard. The dwarven woman was powerfully built, broad-shouldered and thick through the arms. She possessed the sort of strength that came from years of hard work and practice. Her neatly trimmed beard framed her jaw, threaded with silver and carefully groomed. “Dragon’s breath! Sneaking up like that. Nearly knocked ten years off my life.”

The fluffin bounced in place.

“Doesn’t bother you a bit, does it?” She sighed. “Fine, come along. I expect you already know where we’re headed.”

Neville gave a happy bark. He padded alongside Magda Stone-fist as they descended the last stretch of stairs, tail held at a jaunty angle. The tunnel opened up and before them stretched a vast, hollow space—an underground city carved into the deep. The remnants of once-grand buildings surrounded them, breathtaking even in ruin. Stone facades rose twenty or thirty feet or more, covered with delicate panels of gold and carved from glittering stone in shades of white stone or gray marble flecked with green. Reliefs had been carved across many buildings, depicting ancient kings and queens and long forgotten beasts and battles, the stones worn soft by time. The city had clearly been abandoned for many years. And yet the lights were eternally lit. High pillars held hanging lanterns, burning with a gold light that was not fueled by any oil or candle known to those on the surface.

Magda’s pace sped up. Neville trotted behind her, stopping to sniff a fallen block of green-veined stone. He bounced up onto it, as if checking for danger, then hopped down again with a yap. Magda paused to watch him.

“You know, for something so small, you are an astonishingly valuable little creature.”

Neville’s ears twitched as if he already had heard this before.

She frowned down at him, as if he were a student in her class who was not paying quite enough attention. “That means that you might want to watch your back.”

Neville stopped short, spun in place, and then let out a sharp bark that echoed off the stones.

Magda snorted. “Blood and stone, you’re a cocky little thing. Fine, I’ll mind my own business.” She shook her head. “Perhaps you’ll even teach me a thing or two, little scout.”

They picked their way down crumbling streets, the older woman always sure-footed, regardless of the rubble. As they walked, the silence was constant. No voices, no rumbling forges, no footsteps besides their own. At the end of an avenue, the dwarven woman stopped before a grand triumphant arch. Runes and carvings had been etched along its inner curve. Magda strode up to it, pressing her palm flat against a rune on one side. Instantly, the arch flared with a green-gold light. She moved into the arch, Neville at her heels, and passed through.

On the other side, the air was suddenly full of voices. Children laughing. Sellers in a market shouted, hawking their wares. In the distance came the hiss of steam and the thud of engines turning somewhere below. The city here was not ruined. It thrived. Buildings soared around them, replete with flawless stonework and decorated with precious gems. Banners covered with dwarven script and runic symbols hung from balconies. The air smelled of fresh baking, the dust of freshly cut stone, and the heat of iron.

Magda marched on, ignoring the market and the crowds, the fluffin unnoticed at her heels. She finally halted at the end of a broad avenue. An immense hall lay in front of them, carved right into the rock face. Massive pillars flanked the entrance. She paused a few paces short of the large, gold-paneled doors and looked down at the fluffin. “This is where I head in. You probably know why I’m here.”

Neville cocked his head.

She gestured at the hall with her chin. “Official business.” She glanced around. “If they see you, they’ll want you to stay. Make sure you’re using that little trick of yours.”

Neville’s eyes gleamed.

She chuckled softly. “That so? Already doing it, are you?” She shook her head. “Fascinating little creatures,” she muttered to herself. “Ought to have him give a demonstration to my class.” She turned and walked up to the great doors. “Come along then, little scout.”

Behind her, unseen and unheard, the fluffin padded along as the stone hall swallowed them both.

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CHAPTER 30

MEDRA



I stepped out of the carriage. In front of me rose the Sanctum of the Bloodmaiden. In the sunlight, the white stone glowed with a soft luminescence. Tall fluted columns bordered the front facade. A crepidoma of wide, shallow steps wrapped around the temple. At the top of the steps, standing to one side of the temple doors stood a contingent of highbloods from which Elaria Avari stood just a little apart. The older highblood woman had centered herself under the lintel, beneath the carving of the Bloodmaiden. The goddess towered over Elaria, larger than life, her hands cupped in front of her breasts, cradling what I'd always assumed was some of her own blood.

Some might say it was a beautiful piece of artwork. I loathed the thing.

I tried not to raise my eyes too high as I walked slowly toward the Sanctum, with Rodriguez on one side and a space where Blake should have been at my other. Blake had surprised me that morning. He'd wanted to go on ahead, said that there was something he needed to do at the temple and he'd meet us all there. That had seemed fine at the time, but now it had suddenly become a problem—because it looked as if the meeting wasn't going to happen inside the Sanctum after all. No, this little showdown was going to take place right here out in the open. On the plus side, there wouldn't be any suffocating incense burning or priestesses chanting creepily. On the downside, it looked like Blake might completely miss this happy little gathering.

Unless … *Where are you?* I queried. *I don't think this thing is going to happen in the atrium after all. Looks like Elaria wants to talk out in the fresh air.* But I got only silence in response. Either Blake couldn't hear me

or he was ignoring me. If he was ignoring me, I knew he must have a good reason.

I glanced over my shoulder. Behind me came the Bloodwing group, a mix of staff and students. Kage Tanaka and Lysander Orphos strode behind Rodriguez and me, both looking very official in Bloodwing uniforms that matched their house colors. Kage wore a high-collared, military-style black jacket with silver piping along the edges. Lysander's coat was a longer-cut pale gold with a purple silk lining that flashed when he walked, and gold chains instead of buttons fastening down the front. Both had the Bloodwing school crest emblazoned on the right lapels. I'd never seen these styles of uniforms before. Maybe they were used only on special occasions like graduations. Regardless, they were a nice touch. Behind them, Visha walked alongside Theo and Vaughn. I'd noticed Vaughn and Theo were holding hands. They seemed to have made up, despite the trauma they'd both just gone through.

Theo's asshole father had killed Vaughn's poor grandmother. But then, I guess Theo had made up for that a tiny bit when he'd shot a dragon for Vaughn's sake and ultimately, helped rescue him and his grandfather. In Sangratha, maybe that was actually a happy ending. Trauma and romance certainly seemed to go hand in hand here. I wondered if Theo had told Vaughn that Viktor Drakhar-row was his father yet.

I looked back at the temple. Elaria Avari looked distinguished as always. Her silver-white hair was pulled back, highlighting her beautiful cheekbones and unyielding jaw. She wore a black fitted knee-length gown, with a silver jacket overtop. The jacket looked like something a commander in the army might wear. My heart sank. That was probably not a good sign.

To the left of Elaria stood a group of about twenty elite high-bloods. I recognized some of them as members of House Avari and House Mortis. Silvio Santos stood near the front, his handsome golden-toned face smooth and unreadable. Catherine Mortis might be gone, but clearly Santos hadn't minded stepping up.

I was surprised when I recognized one of the faces in Elaria's little group: Aryel Drakharrow. Theo's mother looked painfully out of place. She wore House Drakharrow colors, but that was where any sign that she was the new official leader of the house ended. Her shoulders were hunched forward, her hands clasped tightly in front of her. I watched as her eyes leaped nervously to Elaria, then away.

“I can’t believe you dragged me into this,” I muttered to Rodriguez. “This is going to be a shit show.”

Rodriguez didn’t bother denying it. “Sure is.” He glanced behind us at Kage and Lysander.

I knew if Elaria had had her way, Kage would be up there beside her right now. I hid a small smile. Instead, he was standing with us, a big *fuck you* to Lady Avari. It must have been humiliating to see her grandson come walking up in such mixed company. I walked up the steps until I stood a few feet away from Lady Avari, with Rodriguez right beside me. The others arranged themselves around us.

“Lady Avari,” Rodriguez said politely, “you asked for this meeting. Here we are.”

She inclined her head. “I summoned you, yes. I did not instruct you to bring—” she gestured with a silver-gloved hand “—an entire delegation of your rebel supporters.”

I raised a brow. “Rebels? Now, that’s a new one.” I looked down at the step where Kage was standing. “Your grandson is here with us. Is he a rebel?”

“He should be up here beside me. With his blood,” Elaria said coldly, dodging the question.

“We’ll let you talk that over later,” Rodriguez said, impatience starting to tinge his tone. “You called for a meeting. We’re here to discuss what needs to be discussed.”

“There will be no discussion,” Elaria declared.

I felt my spine stiffen.

“You might consider this a series of announcements.” She looked at all of us. “Since you happen to be here, you’ll be privileged enough to hear the news before the rest of Sangratha does.”

There was a murmur among my friends, and I exchanged a brief glance with Rodriguez. He didn’t say anything, but I saw his shoulders tighten.

Elaria turned slightly, then lifted her voice. “I’m pleased to announce to you all today that House Avari has entered into a binding alliance with House Mortis.”

Mortis. Of course. Behind Elaria, Silvio’s mouth turned up in the hint of a smirk.

“Under the new authority given me by this alliance,” Elaria continued, “and in light of recent … instability, I will be assuming the mantle of High

Regent.”

“High Regent?” Visha demanded, stepping up beside me. “What the fuck is a *high regent*?”

Elaria fixed her with an icy stare. “The title may be a new one, but I should think the answer is obvious.”

Visha snorted. “You’re really going to announce a coup in front of the Sanctum?”

“It is not a coup,” Elaria countered. “It’s a consolidation of power.”

“I’m surprised Aryel Drakharrow doesn’t have something to say about this,” I pointed out. “She’s the new leader of House Drakhar-row after all and thus one of the regents of Sangratha.”

The four regents were meant to share power equally. Of course, Viktor had never liked to share. I was actually surprised he hadn’t come up with the *high regent* thing first. Aryel stood there, looking awkward and, to be honest, totally incompetent.

Elaria smiled calmly. “Aryel Drakharrow knows that my stepping up as High Regent is the only thing which will save Sangratha from civil war. Viktor Drakharrow was High Regent in all but name. At least I am being transparent about my new position.”

Around me chatter broke out.

Elaria raised her voice a little. “Make no mistake. We stand on the precipice of incredible turmoil. Considering that Viktor Drak-harrow’s dragon was responsible for the devastation of Veilmar, every remaining member of his house should feel fortunate they are not standing here in chains.”

I didn’t dare glance over my shoulder to look at Theo. Beside me, Visha had gone still.

“Cooperation is in everyone’s best interests,” Elaria continued. “House Drakharrow will retain its holdings and titles—for now—under the oversight of Houses Avari and Mortis. A mutually beneficial arrangement.”

Aryel was still keeping her mouth shut.

“Which brings us to House Orphos.”

I glanced back at Lysander. His expression was bland and polite. Kage stood at his side. The Avari’s eyes were fixed on his grandmother, cool and unblinking.

If Elaria noticed her grandson staring her down, she didn’t remark on it. Instead, she went on. “House Orphos has involved itself in matters

bordering on treason.”

“House Orphos works for the good of all Sangratha,” Lysander said evenly, “as my house always has. What you call treason I call trying to bring down Viktor Drakharrow’s reign of terror and his oppressive oversight of Bloodwing Academy.”

“House Orphos has always been naïvely idealistic,” Elaria snapped. “Don’t you already have your own little school in the Sable Isles? Why bother with this one?” She sniffed. “Honestly, Lysander, at this point, I’m surprised you’re willing to identify as a highblood at all.”

“I suppose I don’t connect highblood existence with cruelty by default as you do, Elaria,” Lysander replied. “While you are correct that Orphos does own the Somnaria Institute, we also supply Blood-wing with a large percentage of its funding. I’m surprised you haven’t called me here to thank House Orphos for our generosity in propping up the academy financially.”

They stared at one another. “I admit I am tempted to have you placed in chains this instant,” Elaria said at last. “As far as I’m concerned you’re not fit to be the leader of any house. In such a time of chaos, House Orphos’s funds may be easily confiscated for the greater good.”

The air suddenly felt charged. Kage moved to stand in front of Lysander. “Anyone who tries to put Lysander Orphos in chains will have to get through me first.” His words carried over to the high-blood crowd, and I saw them whispering. For a second, I wondered if Kage was going to let his wolf loose right there and then—on so-called holy ground, right in front of the temple.

Elaria must have been wondering the same thing. She pursed her lips together. “There’s no need for theatrics. I seek to avoid violence, Grandson.”

“If you really want to avoid civil war as you claim, Grandmother, then I suggest you don’t provoke one on the temple steps,” Kage shot back.

The silence stretched. Finally, Elaria filled it. “Bloodwing has always been a training ground for the best of Sangratha, not a sanctuary for the weak. In recent days it has drifted from its true purpose.” Her eyes cut to mine. “Effective immediately, Bloodwing will return to its original goal. There will be no further displays of rebellious autonomy.” Her eyes moved to Rodriguez. “Gabriel Rodriguez, you are hereby removed as headmaster.” Her lips curled. “Furthermore, your services of instruction are no longer required at the school.” Her words rang out like a sentence of exile.

“You have no right,” I said hotly, stepping forward.

“Medra Pendragon, what are you even doing here?” Elaria demanded, looking down her nose at me with distaste. “You have no dragon.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to say *Actually, Elaria, he’s just inside the temple.* But I kept my mouth shut.

She smiled, mistaking my hesitation for defeat. “That’s right. You are a dragonless rider. You are a House Drakharrow pet. I suppose you may continue to attend Bloodwing if the Drakharrows wish you to do so, though I see no real point.”

And to think I’d believed Kage’s grandmother had potential as an ally.

“There are still some refugees at Bloodwing. Where exactly do you propose they go?” Rodriguez asked, his voice mild. I supposed he wasn’t exactly surprised by all of this, considering the amount of mail Elaria had been sending.

She smiled thinly. “They will be relocated.”

“Relocated where?” I demanded.

“To labor districts. To serve within the great houses. To wherever they may be most useful.”

“Useful to highbloods,” I spat. We’d see to the refugees ourselves before this could happen. I knew Rodriguez must already have a plan in the works. “Who exactly will be stepping up if you’re throwing Rodriguez out?”

Elaria waved a hand. “Headmistress Pansera did an admirable job. I understand she was … missing but has returned to the school. I see no reason why she should not resume her duties.”

I opened my mouth and shut it again. Rodriguez’s mouth twitched, but I knew he wasn’t going to say a word.

“You don’t have the authority for any of this,” Visha sneered. “Not really. The majority of Bloodwing students support the new measures we’ve put in place. They don’t mind having a blightborn headmaster.”

“They’ll toe the fucking line,” Elaria snapped, “or we will use force.”

Visha laughed. *“Force?”*

Elaria looked down at her coldly. “We will use the might of Houses Avari and Mortis combined—a significant threat.”

Lysander didn’t remark on this; I knew Orphos wasn’t as weak as they let on. But I suddenly wondered how strong they were militarily speaking. They certainly seemed financially well-off. But Avari and Mortis both had standing armies. Did Orphos? Drakharrow must have their own forces.

How many had Viktor directed elsewhere? How many were at the Bonewood with Marcus and Catherine? And if Blake tried to get control, would they follow Aryel's command or his?

"Do not mistake my restraint here today as weakness," Elaria warned. "If you continue to foment rebellion within the school, my next measures will not be merely administrative." Her gaze landed on me. "They will be harsh and forceful."

"Threats of force?" Rodriguez said softly. "When we have a dragon on our side?"

Elaria laughed. "A dragon? Will you really make such a bold-faced claim to my face? My sources tell me Nyxaris is gone. Florence Shen is missing. It does not sound as if either will be returning anytime soon for you to use as your shield."

Blake, you might want to come out here now, I thought for a second. *But only if you think you can control your temper*. And his shifting. We didn't want to tell Elaria anything about Blake's new powers until we had to—and until he'd mastered perfect control. Which might be a while.

Every time Blake had tried to shift since we'd destroyed Vorago had been a disaster. He just didn't seem to be able to do it, or some part of him didn't want to. Given what he'd done the last few times, I didn't blame him. But at some point, we'd need his dragon. He had to gain the confidence in himself to know he was never going to hurt innocents ever again.

Now, Lady Avari was another matter. I glanced at Kage, but his face was expressionless.

Elaria leaned in toward us. "You both allowed blightborn to forget their place. Now all over Sangratha, blightborn children question theirs."

My eyes flashed. "Sounds like progress to me."

"Sounds like hope," Rodriguez agreed, not bothering to hide his smile this time. "Elaria, I think there's something you're not saying out loud."

She frowned at him. "Oh? And what's that?"

"What you call destabilization, I would call evolution," Rodriguez said. "And what you call civil war, I might call an uprising."

"Why, you blightborn bastard," Elaria exclaimed. She looked behind her. "You all heard him. He threatened rebellion. Rebellion against highbloods."

There were murmurs of angry agreement behind Rodriguez. Elaria opened her mouth again, and I knew this time it would be to call for chains.

But before she could speak, Kage stood in front of his grandmother. “Don’t,” he said, his voice low.

I understood the threat. I knew Elaria must, too. Had a wolf ever broken from the pack like this before? What would happen if Kage carried out his threat? Would his house see it as the ultimate betrayal? What about all the students within House Avari back in the school? I knew some of their parents must be here. Would they stand with them or with Kage? Did we have time to see what they’d decide?

Before I could even worry about it anymore, there was a commotion in the courtyard behind the rows of carriages. Something was happening. A group of people had crossed the bridge from Veilmar and were approaching the Sanctum.

Elaria’s face was already flushed with fury. She raised her hand. “Highbloods, prepare yourselves. Stand ready. If this is blightborn provocation, we must end it quickly and without mercy.”

The guards who were with her shifted positions, their hands going to their hilts. But I knew most of them wouldn’t even need swords to tear the average blightborn apart. They could rip out throats if they wanted to.

“Wait,” I started to say. Then Rodriguez touched my arm.

“I suggest you have your guard stand down, Lady Avari,” he said calmly. “Those aren’t blightborn. At least, not the kind you mean. They’re dwarves.”

He was right. They were all dwarves. And from the look of it, they’d come straight from below the surface. At the head of the group marched a woman dressed in heavy armor. Her beard was braided with bands of gold. She carried an iron helmet tucked under one arm. My eyes lit up in delight: it was Professor Stonefist. Behind her marched an honor guard. Dwarves clad in heavy ceremonial armor, shields bearing sigils of hammers hitting stone, some carrying tall banners. Behind them walked other figures, in robes of deep green and gold.

Magda Stonefist approached the bottom of the steps and paused. Behind her, the dwarven delegation came to a halt. “Lady Avari, Headmaster Rodriguez.” Her cheeks were flushed as if she wasn’t used to making formal speeches. “It is my honor to present to you the dwarven delegation from Thrazdummar. Members of our high council are here to speak with you. They demand the calling of a moot.”

She kept speaking, but I didn’t hear a single word past that. Because I’d just caught sight of a towering figure walking at the rear of the dwarven formation: a massive, armored brown bear.

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CHAPTER 31

BLAKE



I’d waited too long for answers to be handed to me. Today I planned to demand them.

I stepped into the stillness of the Sanctum. Growing up, I’d been taught the hushed silence was yet another sign of the sacredness of the place. I walked through the atrium toward the nave, where rows of white stone benches were split by two wide aisles. At the far end of the sanctuary stood an altar. A huge, white marble statue of the Bloodmaiden stood behind it, the goddess’s hands stretched out and cupped together. Was she offering blood or demanding it? The nave was empty at this time of day. There were no lines of blightborn standing before the altar, waiting to make an offering. No rituals in progress. No priestess standing in front of the altar leading a service.

I walked slowly up one of the main aisles. The air smelled faintly of incense. Above, the ceiling arched high, ribbed with pale stone that curved inwards to form a dome. Light filtered down from narrow windows far overhead. Along the sides of the nave, a few votaries in white robes moved quietly, wiping down surfaces and replacing candles. I approached the altar and stared down at the solid slab of marble. At its base sat a silver basin. I’d seen that basin full to the brim with blightborn blood before. I’d swallowed the small red offering tablets more times than I could count. Today the thought of doing so turned my stomach.

I looked up into the Bloodmaiden’s carved stone face, wondering what kind of a woman she’d really been. Girls were killed in this place. I’d seen the Adoration Rite, where their blood was used to give highbloods greater power. When I was young no one had told me that. I hadn’t known the rite existed back then. But my mother and father must have known. Had they

condoned it? What else could you call it when my mother had entered the Sanctum? She'd given herself to this place. If that wasn't condoning what went on here, what was it?

"May I help you, my lord?"

I turned around to see a priestess standing there, clad in a long white robe trimmed in gold. One of the votaries must have noticed me and fetched her.

"You can. I'm here to see the high priestess."

She looked at me carefully. I knew she must know who I was. Blake Drakharrow, the Black Prince. The Peacebringer's son. Viktor Drakharrow's nephew.

"What do you wish to see her about?" she asked finally.

"That's between her and me."

"I can relay a message. However, I'm afraid the high priestess is not receiving visitors."

Whether she was receiving visitors or not, I knew she was there: She hadn't simply stepped out to do some errands in Veilmar. Every child in Sangratha knew that once the high priestess took her vows, she could never leave the Sanctum.

I felt like a child again, standing there in the nave. But then, I was a child. For years, I'd chosen to be one. I'd opted to be gullible and naïve.

My mother had left Aenia and me that day. I'd accepted everything Viktor had told me about her since. That she'd left willingly. That she'd chosen to devote her life to service to the Bloodmaiden. I'd chosen to believe the biggest lie my uncle had ever told me: that my mother cared so little about her own children that she was choosing not to see us. For years, Viktor had delivered messages to us that were supposedly from her. Infrequent and cool. Mother had sent her love. She couldn't see us. She was happy where she was. She needed us to respect her choice. In the wake of my father's death, it had somehow been easier to believe Viktor's lies. To believe that my mother's grief had been so great, so profound, and so sudden that … well, that she'd chosen absence. That she'd abandoned us to make sacred vows.

But now, standing there, I let myself feel the truth I'd always known. My mother loved us. She would never have left us willingly. Which meant she was somewhere in the Sanctum, being kept all this time against her will. Or she was long dead. Either way, I was a fool. I'd fallen for the lies and hadn't even tried to fight for the truth.

“In that case,” I said slowly, “I believe I’ll sit here for a while and pray.”

Relief filled the priestess’s eyes. I could see she’d thought she’d have to argue with me. “That’s a wonderful idea. The Bloodmaiden hears all prayers.”

“She’s certainly more available than the high priestess.” I tried not to laugh when the woman’s face flushed. “I take it you know who I am?”

She nodded stiffly.

“Good.” I gestured around the nave. “I’d like privacy while I pray.”

She glanced over at the votaries. “I’ll have the nave cleared out for you.” She hesitated. “How long do you expect to be here?”

I smiled serenely. “I suppose that all depends on what the Blood-maiden says in response to my prayers.”

The priestess inclined her head. I sat down and watched as she approached the young women working. One by one they moved out of the nave. I listened as the nave doors were pulled closed. I waited for a moment, then let my shoulders drop and looked down at my feet where the fluffin sat.

I’d noticed Neville while I was speaking with the priestess. He’d trotted down the aisle, then darted into one of the pews. He must have followed me into the Sanctum when I entered. “The temple, Nev? You certainly like to live dangerously.” I leaned forward and scratched the fluffin gently between the ears. His large owlish eyes were fixed on me with an expectant expression. “Guess I shouldn’t be surprised to see you,” I murmured. “Trouble is your middle name.” I leaned forward, elbows on my knees. “So do you know where she is? Because I’m done playing games.”

The fluffin gave a single, decisive wag of his tail, as if to say I shouldn’t be so dismissive of games. Then he rose to his feet, took two quick steps down the pew, and looked back over his shoulder.

“Right.” I stood up and followed. “I’m coming.”

He trotted into the aisle and turned, not back to the main doors but to the altar itself. My pulse sped up as he hopped up onto the platform. I followed him, stepping past the altar. The statue of the Bloodmaiden’s eyes felt heavy upon me as I passed, following Neville as he slipped between the statue’s base and the wall and vanished out of sight. I followed and found a narrow door set flush into the stone, almost invisible unless you knew where to look. Behind the door was a stairwell. The white stone steps spiraled up,

tight and steep. Neville skipped up them quickly, and I followed, heart-beat loud in my ears.

We reached a landing. I trailed the fluffin out onto a balcony corridor. The space was flooded with light. Down below lay a garden courtyard. Priestesses walked through the garden, white robes bright against the greenery. I flattened myself against the wall, but the fluffin didn't slow his pace and padded ahead with his usual confidence. I followed more quickly, hoping no one would glance up at the wrong moment.

Finally, the little creature stopped in front of a pale wooden door banded with silver. Nothing else marked it as important. The fluffin didn't bark. He simply sat back and looked at me.

So, this was it.

My hand hovered over the handle. What was I going to see when I pushed this door open? Was this my mother's room? Would she be there waiting on the other side? Heart pounding, I turned the knob.

The room was smaller than I'd been expecting, which made sense as it looked like it was some kind of a study or office. A tall narrow window on the far wall let in light. A heavy desk of white marble sat in the center. Behind the desk sat High Priestess Hallowyn. She was older than I remembered, but then, I hadn't been attending the Sanctum very regularly the past few years, and Hallowyn only really made appearances at services a few times a year. Her white robes were edged in crimson. Silver hair fell in a long braid behind her back. Her pale violet eyes glittered with a hard expression.

"What do you think you are doing here? Get out at once," she barked.

Instead of answering, I shut the door behind me and crossed over to the desk where I dropped into the chair opposite her without asking for permission. Sometime between my standing out in the hall and entering the room, Neville had disappeared.

"Let's save time and skip the introductions. You know who I am. I'm here for answers," I said flatly. "I'd say they're long overdue."

Her lips thinned. "A prince of your house you may be, Blake Drakharrow, but in the Bloodmaiden's own Sanctum you have no sway. This is a sacred house. I did not sanction this audience. Now, you should leave before—"

"No," I interrupted. I leaned forward, bracing my arms on the desk. "I'm not leaving. And no one is coming to help you." I bared my fangs. She was

a highblood, like me. She could move quickly. Maybe she'd even make it to the door, but she wouldn't make it to the hall. And if she tried, she'd lose some of her precious dignity. I pictured tackling the high priestess. It would be awkward. Really awkward. But I'd fucking do it if I had to.

To my surprise, she didn't run, nor did she scream. "You should discuss any questions you have with your uncle," she said curtly.

I laughed. "Yeah, well, that's a problem. Because dear old Uncle Viktor is gone. What's that rural blightborn expression? He's *flown the coop*. You know exactly what he did. Did you already know he had that kind of power?"

Her gaze flickered. "Of course not." She was lying. And there was something else there behind her eyes. Something she was trying to hide. The reason she wasn't trying to reach the door. The reason she wasn't bothering to scream.

"You know it wasn't Viktor who attacked Veilmar that night," I said softly.

Hallowyn flinched. "What are you talking about?"

"You know. Which means you were watching that night. You know Viktor well enough to know what his dragon looks like." I leaned back and gave a bitter laugh. "Seems to me like you know an awful fucking lot. So you know about me. In that case, I don't think I need to explain how dangerous that makes me to you."

She swallowed. "What do you want to know?"

"I'm done being lied to. I want to know everything."

She straightened up. "If this is about your mother—"

"Of course it's about my mother. You're going to tell me where she is."

She folded her hands in her lap. "I'm afraid I'm not authorized to discuss Desdemona Drakharrow."

Something inside me snapped. I stood up. "I'm authorizing it. You will tell me where my mother is right now. Or I'll do to your Sanctum what I did to Veilmar that night."

She stared up at me. "You're insane." But I could see she'd realized the threat was real.

I chuckled. "Priestess, I'll tell you a little secret. Viktor Drak-harrow commanded me to do what I did to Veilmar that night. I didn't want to do it, and I would have stopped myself if I'd been able to. But laying this white marble travesty of a temple to waste with dragon flame? Now, that would

be a fucking delight. So yeah, maybe I am a little insane. Or maybe I'm just a blooddamned Drak-harrow. Now, tell me where the fuck my mother is, because I'm done asking politely."

Her shoulders sagged, and I knew I was going to get what I needed. "She is not in the Sanctum."

"Then, where is she?" I demanded. "If you tell me again that you're *not authorized*, I swear to—" I stopped, suddenly realizing what I was doing—threatening an unarmed woman. But not just any woman, a priestess of the Bloodmaiden. To lay a hand on a woman who served in the temple was not only sacrilege but a capital offense.

I stared down at the older highblood. I didn't know much about Hallowyn. I didn't even know her last name. Women gave up their family names and house affiliations when they made their vows. But I knew she must have come from a noble family. High priestesses were always selected from the noblest bloodlines. Her family may have given her to the Sanctum. Or perhaps she'd volunteered. She would have taken her vows young, when she'd been hardly more than a girl. The very fact that she was here meant she was loyal to Sangratha and extremely devout.

Then I thought of the girl who'd been murdered in the Adoration Rite, and suddenly the high priestess didn't seem so innocent after all. My heart hardened. Devout or not, she was ruthless. She was highblood. In her own way, she was just as much of a monster as I was.

"Tell me what I want to know," I said quietly. "I don't want to hurt you. But I will."

The priestess's mouth quivered. "You presume a great deal being here."

"I presume I have the right to the truth," I shot back. "You should be grateful I waited this long to demand it. Now, tell me. Is my mother dead?"

She hesitated.

"Fuck," I whispered. In that moment I realized how much hope I'd still been holding out that I'd find her here. "She's dead, isn't she?"

Hallowyn looked as if she was choosing her words with care. "Your mother made a sacrifice."

"What's that supposed to mean? Sacrifice, like in the Adoration Rite?"

"No," she said. "Not in that kind of rite."

I clenched my teeth. "But it was a rite, then?"

She nodded slowly. "The most sacred rite there is. Few know of its existence—or its true purpose."

“Well, I’m about to be one of those few. Tell me.”

Her gaze flickered, and I saw her working hard to maintain her composure. “Desdemona Drakharrow became what we call a Living Relic. The Bloodmaiden’s most faithful servant. And in a way …”

“What?” I demanded.

She licked her lips. “In a way she became like the Bloodmaiden herself.”

That stopped me cold. “Speak clearly. Much more clearly.”

“She is …” There was that hesitation again.

“Tell me. Or else, I swear by your precious Bloodmaiden that you’ll have an Inferni dragon filling your office if you don’t. Believe me, there won’t be room for us both.”

Her face tightened. “Women who become Relics are neither fully living nor are they permitted to die.”

My heart was pounding so hard it hurt. “How can she be neither alive nor dead? Where is she?”

“She volunteered,” Hallowyn insisted, “as many holy highblood women have before her. She exists in a long line of martyrs—”

“Don’t,” I warned her. “Don’t you fucking dare tell me my mother chose this. I know my mother, and I know she wouldn’t have left her family. She wouldn’t have abandoned her children. There is no way she volunteered.”

Hallowyn flinched. “I do not know the full terms of the arrangement. I was not high priestess at the time.” I hadn’t realized that part. “I only know that your uncle worked closely with my predecessor and with your mother.”

In other words, Viktor had coerced my mother into this. I suddenly realized the answer was obvious. No, my mother hadn’t volunteered. She’d done this to protect us, Aenia and me. Viktor had wanted her out of the way. He’d threatened to kill us. And with my father gone, my mother must have felt she had no other choice but to comply. To *sacrifice*.

“Where is she? Where did the rite take place?”

“To the north. At the edge of Sangratha.”

I cursed. “You mean the Bonewood?”

She stared. “Yes, the Bonewood. How did you—?”

“It doesn’t matter. I know about the Bonewood. Now, tell me, what does this have to do with the Veil?”

“I see you know far more than you should,” she said coldly. “The Relics seal the Veil. They keep the boundary closed. They exist on the threshold, feeding the Veil with their blood and … being fed.”

I stared at her. “What the fuck.” It wasn’t a question.

“It is a sacred arrangement,” she claimed.

“It makes no fucking sense.”

She looked displeased. “You challenge holy doctrine? You would blaspheme against the Bloodmaiden?”

“I’m blaspheming against my uncle,” I snapped. “But the Bloodmaiden’s not looking so good in my books right now either.” I shook my head. “This makes no sense. My uncle is trying to tear the Veil down—that’s where my brother and Catherine Mortis are right now, at the borderlands, trying to destroy it. Viktor doesn’t want to protect Sangratha. He wants the realms to bleed together.”

Hallowyn looked horrified. “That’s not possible. The Veil must be preserved. Without it—”

“Everything breaks,” I finished. “I know. But Viktor must not believe that.” Her shock was genuine. I stared at her, thinking hard. “Or he wanted to preserve the Veil. Until now. Maybe something’s changed. Maybe now he’s ready.”

“Ready for what?” Hallowyn asked.

“Dragons.” The pieces of the puzzle clicked into place. “That’s what changed. There were no dragons for generations. Viktor can become one, but it seemed to take a hell of a lot out of him. And maybe one dragon isn’t enough. Whatever it takes to tear down the Veil, it was a power he didn’t have, so he kept shoring it up. Because whatever was on the other side, he wasn’t prepared to meet it head on.”

But now he was.

I looked at the priestess. “Is my mother alive or not?”

She closed her eyes. “You cannot reach her. Whatever essence of her may exist is no longer your mother in any meaningful sense of the word.”

So, that was it, then. Desdemona was dead. I cleared my throat. “Is she suffering?”

“I do not know. Truly. She is no longer highblood. She is … something else. Not of this world.”

“All right.” I turned to the door. “That’s all I needed.”

Maybe it wasn’t very polite, but I didn’t bother saying goodbye. I sped down the spiral staircase leading back to the nave. Neville was still nowhere to be seen, but I wasn’t worried about him. That little rascal knew his way

around better than I did. I walked straight down the aisle, ignoring the stares from votaries and priestesses who had returned to the chamber.

As I stepped into the atrium someone was coming through the main doors at the same time. Pendragon. She looked flustered. Her cheeks were flushed and some of her red curls were escaping from the black ribbon she'd used to bind them back with. Her beautiful mouth, wide and full, was set in a stubborn line I knew all too well. My heart hitched as she came toward me. Bloodmaiden, she was beautiful. She was dragon fire made flesh. All fire and spirit, something that could never be tamed. Her hair caught the light like burning embers, the waves cascading over her shoulders. I stared at the constellation of freckles that danced over the bridge of her nose and across her cheeks, and my chest ached.

What a strange thing love was. I suddenly remembered something my mother had once told me as a child. That being a parent was like carrying a piece of your heart outside of your body. I'd felt it for Aenia. But never for Regan. Not even close. Now I felt that same depth of feeling for my consort. Loving Pendragon wasn't simple. It wasn't merely joy, it was vulnerability and terror. Pleasure and pain woven together so tightly that I didn't know where one ended and the other began. And to think I'd never wanted this. That I'd fought and resisted. That I'd half convinced myself I hated her—even as I burned for her, yearned for her. Now standing here in the Sanctum, I knew there was nothing I'd trade for it. Not safety or power or peace. Pendragon was a part of me. She was my heart.

My chest tightened as I thought of Florence Shen. This kind of vulnerability was dangerous. It was exactly how a monster like Viktor won.

"What is it? The meeting with Elaria—"

"It didn't go well," Pendragon said bluntly. "But that's not why I came to find you. Our meeting with Elaria ended early."

I frowned. "Why?"

"Because the dwarves arrived."

My brows shot up. "What do you mean *the dwarves*—"

The Sanctum doors split open a second time, crashing against the walls like a hammer striking stone, and a creature stepped inside. My mind couldn't make sense of what I was seeing. And I'd seen fucking dragons. This thing was huge, easily a head taller than the tallest highblood. It was broad and burly and covered head to toe in gleaming gold armor—dwarven armor. The plates were intricate, finely overlapping, and etched with

symbols I only recognized from a rabbit hole into dwarven culture I'd gone down for a few weeks as a child. And beneath the armor? Thick, dark brown fur.

A fucking bear was standing in the Bloodmaiden's Sanctum. I half laughed, half snorted, trying to imagine Hallowyn's face.

The bear stopped a few feet away, towering over Pendragon and me. Only then did I realize it was carrying a huge battle-ax in one hand. The bear opened its mouth and spoke. "Are you Blake Drakharrow?"

I swear the stones of the atrium shook. I stepped forward, trying not to think too hard about what was happening. "We like to use our indoor voices in the temple. But yes, that's me. Who the hell wants to know?"

"Blake." Pendragon's voice sounded pained. But I wasn't going to pretend to be civil when a huge armored bear had just yelled in my face while holding a sharp object.

I couldn't read the bear's expression. But it let out a low, rumbling growl, then looked down at Pendragon. "This is he? This uncouth, fanged man is your husband?"

Pendragon's eyes widened. "*Husband*? I mean, not exactly—"

"Yes," I snapped, stepping up and wrapping my arm around her waist possessively, while never taking my eyes off the bear. "I'm her husband. Pendragon is mine. Now, who the fuck wants to know?"

"This pale little man?" Now I was sure I was reading the bear's expression correctly. And the bear wasn't impressed.

I snarled, baring my fangs. "Hey, is it the hair? It's a highblood thing. We all have it. And gotta say, it's kind of rude to talk about someone's appearance when they're standing right there. I mean, we just met, but you don't see me commenting on how hairy you are."

The bear stared down at me. "You abducted her. You forced her to wed you."

"I never forced her," I said automatically. "We had a betrothal, not a wedding. We don't really go in for weddings much in Sangratha, at least not among highbloods. They're more of a blight-born thing, though I've always thought they seemed kind of nice." I remembered something. "All right, I may have forced her *once*."

The bear growled threateningly and lifted their ax with both paws. "Just as I thought."

Pendragon quickly stepped in front of me. “Hawl, stop. You don’t understand.”

“I do not understand?” the bear boomed. “What do I not understand, little cub? This man took you against your will, did he not?”

“Well, yes, at first,” she hedged.

“And you were betrothed to him against your will?” the bear continued.

“Well, yes,” she admitted.

Shit. This wasn’t going so well for me.

“And this man has fangs, does he not? Fangs with which he bites you and drains your blood?”

Pendragon’s face had flushed beet red. I stepped in front of her. “All right, that’s none of your fucking business.” I ducked as the ax came flying forward. “What the fuck!”

“Hawl, stop!” Pendragon shouted.

Around us, some of the priestesses had finally come running out of the nave at the commotion. They took one look at the giant bear and started to scream. Didn’t really blame them. Soon the atrium was empty again except for the three of us.

“Hawl, look at me,” Pendragon was yelling. “If you hurt Blake, I will be very, very upset.”

Upset? We’d have to discuss her word choice later. The bear ignored her and stomped toward me.

“Hawl, I love this man,” Pendragon shouted.

The bear stopped. My consort’s hand was on the bear’s arm. It looked so small there against the background of dark fur.

“Love?” I could have sworn the bear was scowling. “Love, little cub?”

“Yes,” Pendragon said firmly. “He is mine just as I am his. We may not have wanted each other at first …” She glanced at me, and I could have sworn her lips twitched. “We made some mistakes along the way. But we are bonded, and that is how I want it.”

“But he is a monster. A creature of terror. And his hair … his fangs … He has put you in danger,” the bear said.

“I mean, no more than I’ve endangered him.” She frowned. “You don’t understand how it works here. He feeds from me, yes. But only because I allow him to. Where are you getting all of this from, anyhow?”

The bear blinked. “Your mother, of course.”

“I should have known!” She threw up her hands. “Look, we’re not doing this here.” Pendragon turned to me. “A dwarven delegation from below the surface has arrived. They’ve demanded that a moot be called.” She wrinkled her nose. “What is a *moot*, anyhow?”

“It’s a gathering. Lots of arguing.” I stared at her. “You’re saying there are dwarves outside right now?” I glanced at the bear. “Is that who *he* came with?”

“*They*,” she corrected. “Yes, Hawl came with the dwarves.” She looked at the bear. “Though, I’m not sure how exactly. Elaria offered to accommodate the dwarves at the Black Keep. But they’ve insisted upon lodging at Bloodwing. I think some of them want to meet with Rodriguez.”

“Wait. What do you mean you’re not sure how this bear got here, exactly?” I demanded.

She bit her full, lush lower lip, and I had to try to resist the urge to bite her right there in the Sanctum. I knew that wouldn’t go over well with the bear.

“Hawl isn’t from Sangratha. They’re not from this world at all. They’re from Aercanum, just like me.”



Hawl wouldn’t fit in the carriage, so Pendragon and I had some time alone. She filled me in. Apparently, the bear—or Bearkin or Ursidaur, as their species were called back in Aercanum—had known her since she was a baby. Once I heard that, I understood why the bear was so protective. I’d never met Pendragon’s mother, but I got the impression Orcades was quite a character, with a rather unique sense of humor. I wasn’t sure exactly what she’d told Pendragon’s family back in Camelot, but apparently my reputation was already shit there, and Hawl had planned to eliminate me as soon as possible. I mean, depending on *when* Pendragon’s mother had spoken to them all, I supposed I couldn’t exactly blame them.

As soon as we arrived back at Bloodwing, a student was waiting to escort us to the headmaster’s office. When we got there, Rodriguez ushered us hastily into the boardroom. I walked in behind Pendragon and our illustrious blightborn headmaster slowly, taking in those in attendance. Kage and Lysander were there, of course. Magda Stonefist sat stiffly in a

chair, looking as if she was on the fence about being in the room. Beside her sat Visha. I caught Vish's expression—somewhere between disgust and outright confusion—and immediately glanced at the person seated to her left. A dwarven boy with a cocky grin on his face, about my age. I looked again. No, not dwarven exactly, he must have been a half-blood. He was taller than the other dwarves in the room. Dark curls fell over his eyes like he'd arranged them that way in a mirror. He was leaning toward Visha, one arm slung casually over the back of her chair. Meanwhile, Visha looked like she was trying to decide whether murdering the boy would be worth a diplomatic disaster and interspecies war.

I glanced across the room to where the Ursidaur was standing in a corner, their massive ax resting against one shoulder. The bear was too big to fit into one of the chairs. Considering how uncomfortable the chairs were, they weren't missing out on much.

Along the other side of the table sat some members of the dwarven delegation. I assumed if they were in the room, that meant they must be pretty important. Some were clad in armor. Others wore fine dwarven-made clothing—coats of rich green fabric, trimmed with gold braids and fastened with beautiful metal clasps. One dwarven man particularly stood out. He sat in the center, his silver-streaked beard braided with gems, gold rings on every finger. His clothing looked richer than what the others were wearing. A heavy gold medallion carved with dwarven symbols hung on a chain across his chest.

Beside him sat a younger dwarven woman who radiated barely suppressed fury like heat from a fire. Her skin was a deep, rich brown. Kohl traced the shapes of her large dark eyes. Her long black hair was plaited into heavy braids, each one tied off at the ends with bands of gold. Her robes seemed almost ceremonial. They were a rich dark green, and the hems and sleeves were bordered in a design of what looked like runes, woven in gold and silver thread. Her jaw was clenched tight as her fingers tapped the arm of her chair impatiently.

"Uh, welcome everyone," Rodriguez said awkwardly, standing at the front of the room. "If you haven't already met our guests from Thrazdummar, allow me to introduce you." He gestured to the powerful man I'd been staring at. "Lord Dinesh Sharma is the head of the Thrazdummar High Council. And to his right is Zaira Bloodshield. Zaira is —" He looked down at the table as if to check his notes. Scratch that, he

was checking notes on a piece of parchment in front of him. “Zaira is a Stone Keeper and—”

“*First* Stone Keeper,” the dwarven woman interrupted, her tone frosty.

“Yes, right, First Stone Keeper. My apologies.” Rodriguez ran through the rest of the introductions, then paused, looking around the room. “Well, you already know why the delegation from Thrazdummar is here. They’ve asked for a moot.”

“We have not asked. We have demanded one, as is our right,” Zaira corrected. She looked around the table. When her eyes found mine, she held my gaze for a moment before shifting her stare to Pendragon. “Besides, Lord Sharma and I are not here for the moot.”

Rodriguez gaped. “You’re not here for the moot? I’m not sure what … I mean, of course, you’re more than welcome to visit Bloodwing. Tomorrow, I’ve arranged a little tour—”

“No,” she interrupted. She looked down at the high-council head beside her, and he gave a tight nod. “We’re here to see your dragon.” She looked across the table at Pendragon and now there was no mistake about it. Zaira was definitely glowering. “And we’re here to meet the woman who murdered Lord Sharma’s grandson.”

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CHAPTER 32

MEDRA



The room went very quiet. I looked over at Lord Sharma. “Are you really Naveen’s grandfather?” He nodded slowly. I took a deep breath. “In that case, I am sorry for your loss. Naveen was my friend. I had no wish to hurt him.”

“Yet you killed him, did you not?” Zaira said icily. “We were told he died at your hands.”

“He did,” I said softly. “He was trying to kill me. I stopped him. But at that point—”

“I’ve got this, Pendragon,” Blake snapped. He stood up beside me, his handsome face stormy. “She did what she had to do to survive. What the letter Headmaster Kim sent you probably left out was that Naveen was trying to kill her, too. He’d been … altered. You wouldn’t even have recognized him. He was already dead. He’d been brought back with blood magic and necromancy.”

Lord Sharma and Zaira glanced at one another. “I don’t understand,” the head of the council said slowly.

“Nor do I,” Zaira said, her voice laden with fury. “Dwarven students are supposed to be off-limits while attending Bloodwing.”

It certainly did seem like an incredibly stupid faux pas to murder the dwarven high-council leader’s grandson. I wondered if Headmaster Kim had a thing about dwarves. Then I thought of Lace and Dani. Or maybe dwarven children simply weren’t quite as untouchable aboveground as their families liked to believe.

“Can we get back to the part about dragons, and you and Medra can settle your little blood feud later?” Visha asked, leaning forward. Traitor.

“Very well,” Zaira said curtly. “Where is your dragon—Nyxaris, I believe he is called? Summon him here.”

I exchanged a look with Blake and Rodriguez. “He’s not around right now. Nor is his rider.”

“When will he be back?” Zaira demanded. “We must see him.”

“Why did you say you were here for a moot when you actually needed to see Nyxaris?” Rodriguez asked, his face puzzled.

“Obviously we doubted the highbloods would allow us access to the dragon,” Zaira replied disdainfully. “But we must see the Duskdrake. It is vital we do so.”

Naveen’s grandfather spoke up. “Zaira and I represent not just the Kingdom of Thrazdummar but the Order of the Emberwatch.”

“The what?” Rodriguez choked, looking stunned. “Did you just say the Emberwatch?”

“That’s right,” Zaira said coolly. “Have you heard this name before?”

“I … Yes, I should say so.” Rodriguez face was strained. “I believed I was the last member.”

Zaira looked amused. “You, the last member?” She shook her head. “No. That’s not the case. The dwarves have always been the foremost members of the Emberwatch.”

Rodriguez looked a little annoyed. “Well, that’s not exactly true. Historically, there have been blightborn members.”

She waved her hand. “Perhaps a few.”

Rodriguez narrowed his eyes; clearly Zaira was now in his bad books. So much for warm Bloodwing hospitality. “I get the impression there’s a great deal you aren’t telling us.”

“Call the dragon here, and we will tell you more,” Zaira challenged.

Rodriguez’s lips thinned. “You think it’s so easy to summon a dragon? He’s not a fucking falcon.”

“Well, your inability to summon him may doom us all,” the Stone Keeper snapped.

The tension in the room rose just a smidgen. “You said you weren’t here for the moot,” Rodriguez said. “You claim to belong to the Emberwatch. What are your real intentions?”

Zaira frowned. “We called for a moot because it gave us an excuse to come to the surface. A public pretext.”

“A pretext for what exactly?” Rodriguez’s voice was soft.

Lord Sharma looked around the room. “I’m not sure how much you already know …”

Kage leaned forward. “Why don’t you talk to us like we know a lot?”

“Very well,” the dwarven leader said. He ran a hand over his face, and I suddenly realized how anxious he was. “The very foundation of Sangratha is cracking.”

“You mean the Veil,” I said sharply.

Zaira’s eyes flashed. “Yes. The Veil. And we know about the attacks at the borderland. We know there are those who are attempting to wound the Veil, to pull it open—highbloods, no doubt.” She looked around the room at the highbloods there with open contempt. “Stupid fools. The Veil will not fall so easily.”

“Well, that’s a fucking relief,” Blake muttered.

“Still, the possibility is there,” she snapped. “The dragons have awakened again.”

“You’re saying this has something to do with the dragons?” Rodriguez asked sharply.

“Of course.” Zaira shot him a look of disdain. “Four dragons were bound in the Dragon Court over a century ago.”

“And you’re saying you had something to do with putting them there?” Rodriguez guessed.

“The Emberwatch met with the dragons. Three of the four agreed they must be bound to protect the Veil—to shore up its reserves of power. They sacrificed themselves.” She frowned. “The fourth—the Inferni—was enforced by the others.” She looked around the room. “The dwarves have been watching what has transpired ever since.”

“Ooh, sounds ominous,” Visha muttered, rolling her eyes.

Zaira glared at her. “We knew when the Duskdrake awoke. We knew when the Inferni flew.”

“Which one?” Visha muttered. I kicked her under the table. Fortunately, Zaira didn’t seem to have heard.

“Then, you must know about Molindra,” I said aloud. Zaira nodded. “Two highbloods are using her to try to break down the Veil. They may have a second dragon. An Inferni.”

“This we know,” Zaira said haughtily. “But the Veil may crumble only with the might of four dragons to tear it down.”

I glanced at Rodriguez. “Well, that’s a relief,” he mumbled, running his hand over his brow. “Look, you don’t have to worry then. Alabryss was destroyed, there are no more Silvraynes.” For a moment, his face was sad. “In fact, it looks like there will never be any again.”

“Oh, no?” Zaira didn’t sound impressed. “I tell you a Silvrayne may yet fly over Sangratha. The danger has not passed. We dwarves are not stupid. Do you think we would have come if we did not already know?”

“Know what?” Rodriguez demanded.

Zaira pursed her lips. “There is a highblood among you whose name is cursed among the dwarves. He has gone by many names. Even for a vampire, he has lived for too many lifetimes. We know he seeks to tear down the Veil. We also know he seeks something we dwarves took from him a very long time ago.”

“Sounds a little familiar.” Blake snapped his fingers. “Viktor. Goes by *Uncle* in my family.” Zaira’s jaw dropped. Blake held up his hands. “Look, First Stone Keeper, I don’t disagree with your assessment of Viktor—he’s an asshole. If you want to stop him, I’m with you. We all are. Viktor Drakharrow is the most hated man in Sangratha right now.” His face darkened, and I knew he was thinking about Veilmar.

Zaira nodded stiffly. “Very well. Your blightborn headmaster said all of the highbloods at this meeting were to be trusted. Still …”

“Wait, so you hate us that much, yet you send dwarven students to our school?” Visha interjected. She raised her brow. “Seems pretty stupid to me.”

Zaira looked at her coolly. “We have an arrangement, one which benefits the dwarven people.”

“You mean one in which the students you send here are your spies?” I guessed.

Zaira flushed. “Not spies.”

“But they bring back information?” I persisted.

“Do you know much about the dwarven kingdom, Medra Pendragon?” Dinesh Sharma asked me, not unkindly. I shook my head. “Dwarves are mostly immune to vampire thrallweave and magical conditioning,” he explained. “The highbloods dislike that about us. In the past, the highbloods attempted to cull the dwarves. To wipe us out completely.”

“I … didn’t know that.” I glanced at Blake.

“Neither did I,” Blake said. He looked at Visha. She shook her head.

Dinesh smiled sadly. “Highblood history is selective. I have no doubt what you all have been taught is riddled with errors. The last time the highbloods attempted this culling, the dwarves fought back with such ferocity that the highbloods were forced to retreat. After that, Thrazdummar was mostly left alone. We do send students to highblood schools from time to time, and we do so with our own motives. Our students become our ears on the surface.” Dinesh looked across at me. “My grandson wished to come to the surface. He had always been curious about life up here.”

I nodded. “He told me so. I knew him for less than a year, but he was a dear friend, one I never wanted to harm. I know it must seem strange to hear me say that, but I never wanted to kill him. Naveen loved Bloodwing. But this school took him and twisted him. It used him up.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Dinesh nodded. “We will speak of Naveen in private. For now, let us return to the greatest matter at hand, the matter of dragons. Viktor Drakharrow seeks the power of dragons.”

My heart sped up. “He needs a Silvrayne. But we’ve already established that’s impossible.” Zaira and Dinesh were silent.

Rodriguez frowned. “It *is* impossible, isn’t it? There are no Silvraynes. How could there be? Alabryss was the last of her kind.”

The dwarven young man sitting beside Visha spoke up. “Before Alabryss was turned to stone, she left something behind.”

“Allow me to introduce my brother,” Zaira said stiffly. “Kazmyn.” Kazmyn waved a hand, looking surprisingly cheerful.

“Lovely to meet you,” Rodriguez said. “But what exactly do you mean, Zaira? What did Alabryss leave behind?”

I already knew. “Eggs? She left eggs.” I made it sound like a guess.

Zaira nodded reluctantly. “Yes, eggs. The eggs lie deep below ground. The dwarves have guarded them for generations.”

Blake frowned. “Viktor wants these eggs? He knows they exist?”

“He believes they are his by right,” she said with derision.

I thought of Viktor Drakharrow possessing baby dragons and felt sick. “Are any of them actually … his?”

“No,” Zaira replied. “But they were once in his possession. The dwarves stole them back. We hid them long ago.”

“Did the dragons know about this? Did Alabryss?” Rodriguez demanded.

“Of course,” Zaira said dismissively. “They wished us to take the eggs. They had no desire for any potential hatchling to fall into Viktor

Drakharrow's hands."

"Potential hatchling?" Blake's eyes went wide. "So the eggs are … hatching?"

Zaira looked at Dinesh. "The eggs have been dormant for many years. But now they are in great jeopardy," Dinesh said bluntly. "We believe the ones trying to destroy the Veil have learned where the eggs are. They are coming to seek them out."

"So why don't you move the eggs?" Blake demanded, leaning forward. "Get them to a safe place."

"We cannot access the eggs by ourselves," Zaira admitted. "We have no way of doing what you say."

I shook my head. "I don't understand. You hid them. Why can't you move them?"

"We hid them with the dragons. With dragon help."

Understanding dawned. "You need a dragon to access the eggs," I said, my heart sinking. "That's why you wanted to see Nyxaris."

Zaira nodded.

"And Viktor Drakharrow has two dragons," Lysander Orphos said quietly.

Rodriguez looked green. "Nyxaris—"

"Shut up, Rodriguez," I said before I could help myself. "Not another word."

Zaira slammed her palms against the table. "Where is Nyxaris? Do you not see how vital he is now? Will you not allow us to speak with him?"

I lifted my chin. "You can't speak with him. He's not here."

"Where exactly have he and his rider gone?" Zaira demanded, her voice dangerously edged. "Have they gone to seek out Viktor Drakharrow? Have they gone toward the Veil? Are you saying that Viktor Drakharrow may soon have three of the four dragons he needs within his control?"

I met Zaira's eyes. "Of course not. I didn't say anything of the sort. I said Nyxaris is not here right now." I pushed back my chair. "I'm exhausted. I think we should adjourn for now."

"What!" Zaira exclaimed.

But it was too late. I was already striding out of the room, with Blake right behind me.

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CHAPTER 33

KAGE



A few hours earlier

The dwarves were leaving. I watched them go, crossing back over the bridge and heading toward Bloodwing. They'd declined my grandmother's kind offer to put them up in the Black Keep. I wondered if they knew the Keep had been Viktor's preferred residence until recently. If that were the case, then they obviously had more discerning tastes.

Where the hell had the dwarves come from, anyhow? As far as I knew, there were no passages near Veilmar leading to any of the dwarven holds.

"Grandson."

I turned. My grandmother stood a few paces away. Her expression was smooth as marble, but I could tell that beneath the facade she was angry. I'd been expecting this. I'd let the others go on without me.

"Walk with me, Grandson."

I knew it wasn't a request. I could put up a fuss, but there was no point. I'd been waiting for this opportunity for a long time. I fell into step beside her as she walked toward the outer edge of the temple where a wall of tall hedges led into a gated garden normally reserved only for those who served in the temple. As we passed by one of the temple colonnades, I caught sight of Theo Drakharrow and his boyfriend, Vaughn Sabino, standing in the shadows, heads leaned toward each other, still hand in hand. Theo caught my eye and gave me a brief nod. I'd never been close with Blake's cousin. I'd been told what he'd done to Nyxaris, some of the details of why had conveniently been excluded, but I knew the basics. He'd wanted to protect the man he loved. As far as I was concerned, that made shooting a dragon make a lot of sense.

Elaria steered me into the garden, never doubting her right to be there. Inside, small white stone sculptures of the Bloodmaiden in a variety of poses lined the paths. Some were old, the stone worn smooth. Others seemed like newer additions. Elaria stopped on a cobblestone path and turned to face me. “You humiliated me today. You humiliated House Avari.”

I didn’t flinch. “That wasn’t my intention. And,” I couldn’t help but add, “I don’t think I did. You’ve been doing a good job of that all on your own since my mother died.”

She looked shocked. Part of me understood. We’d always gotten along until fairly recently. I’d always respected her wishes, done as she’d asked. But lately our purposes hadn’t been aligned. Now my grandmother was walking a new path. And she would walk it alone.

“How dare you,” she fumed. “You undermined me in front of the very Sanctum. In front of our new allies. You challenged my authority openly.” Her lips curled. “You defended Lysander Orphos.”

“You were threatening him with chains, as I recall,” I said evenly. “You know we have always been friends.”

Her face fell, and I saw the confusion behind the mask. “You have always stood at my side. From the moment you could walk and talk, you understood what it meant to be Avari. What it meant to be the heir of this house. Yet now you suddenly hesitate. Now you soften.” She stepped closer, searching my face. “Why? What has changed? Why are you becoming weak?”

I met her gaze and held it. “Softness has nothing to do with it, and you know it. I’m not the one who’s changed. In what world does House Avari ally with House Mortis?”

She bristled. “They were our allies once, why not again? Especially now when highblood power threatens to crumble.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “I don’t think there’s any chance of that happening. Just because we loosen our grip on blightborn throats doesn’t mean they suddenly gain all the power.”

“Of course it does,” she shot back. “Give them an inch, and they’ll take a mile. By nature, the blightborn are grasping, servile, greedy people. They cling to us like parasites, desperate for our protection.”

I stared at her. “*Our protection?* That’s a little rich. The only thing they need protection from is us.”

“You stand in the shadow of the Bloodmaiden’s most holy house and dare to blaspheme?” she demanded.

I rubbed my forehead. “Grandmother, most of who I am came from you. You taught me to protect my people. To recognize tyranny. You taught me that power without restraint destroys everything it touches.” I met her eyes. “You hate Viktor Drakharrow. So tell me, why are you so desperate to set yourself up in his place as the next oppressor?”

Her eyes gleamed. “This is an opportunity for Avari. Don’t you see that? And you would squander it. Standing beside Orphos.” Her mouth thinned. Her composure was cracking. “Your mother never should have allowed you to befriend Lysander Orphos when you were children. His house has always been degenerate.”

I stared at her for a second. Then I laughed again. “*Degenerate?* Are you serious right now?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Do not be deliberately obtuse, Kage.”

“I’m not. Please clarify.” I’d never heard her speak so openly like this before.

She stepped closer, lowering her voice as if afraid we might be overheard. “Affection between men. Or between women. That sort of indulgence is tolerable in the lesser houses or among blight-born. But we must rise above them all. We are meant to hold ourselves to a higher standard. True highbloods do not mate for sentiment. We mate to strengthen bloodlines. When you form your triad—”

“Oh, that’s why you had me agree to become betrothed to Florence Shen, because my mating with a blightborn girl would have helped strengthen our bloodlines?” I was angry at my grandmother and her hypocrisy. But I hadn’t ended my betrothal to Florence because I’d believed her blood wasn’t as good as mine, it had simply been a matter of compatibility. The truth was, as soon as I’d realized Regan was our true mate, I’d had no choice.

“She has a dragon,” my grandmother hissed. “Your betrothal to that girl would have allowed us to consolidate power. You did your duty—and I was proud of you.”

“You were proud of me then, but not now,” I said coldly.

She looked pained. “Your behavior of late confuses me. Now I hear whispers that you and Lysander Orphos went together to retrieve the Pansera girl.”

“The girl who you wish to set up as headmistress again, yes,” I said coolly.

“You risked your life for her. It was unnecessary.” Her gaze sharpened. “Does Lysander know your secret?”

I didn’t answer immediately.

Her eyes narrowed. “Does he know about the Avari? Does he know you can become a wolf?” Her voice broke. “Tell me, Grandson, does your betrayal go that far?”

I looked at the stone sculptures surrounding us and felt something inside me breaking free. “It goes much further,” I admitted. “Lysander Orphos has been my consort for more than two years.”

Her breath caught. Still, she would know what that meant. As my consort, Lysander would never betray my wolf. “You bound yourself so completely, without my consent? Without my approval? You bound yourself to a *man*?” she said, her voice incredulous.

I looked back at her. Elaria Avari and my mother had been my twin rocks growing up. I looked up to them, admired them. I’d trusted them to always do what was best for me. To always know the right thing.

“Yes,” I said simply.

“Leave me,” she said, her voice trembling with rage. “You are no grandson of mine. You have shamed this house. You have shamed your blood. I cast you out of House Avari. May your name rot on the tongues of any who speak it.”

I exhaled slowly. When I spoke, my voice was steady. “No.” Her eyes widened. “I refuse to let you make me feel shame. Not for this.” I stepped toward her, forcing her to look at me. “My love for Lysander is as pure and as natural as my wolf. You may not curse that out of me. Nor may you cast me out.”

“I may not?” she whispered, her lips curling.

“I know where I stand,” I said evenly. “I know my place. I am the future of House Avari, whether you like it or not.”

“You think you have a choice? Why, you—”

“If you do this, you will split House Avari in two, and it will be you who weakens us,” I cut in. “All those at Bloodwing are loyal to me, and you know it.”

She smiled thinly. “That won’t last long. Not when they learn who you’ve allied yourself with.”

I shrugged. “Why don’t we see who makes the better allies?” I started to walk away. “I know who I’d bet on.” I didn’t wait for her to reply. The garden suddenly felt too small for us both after what had just passed between us.

The moment had been coming for years. My one regret was that I hadn’t had the courage to tell my mother while she’d been alive. Lysander and I had been hiding for too long, postponing the inevitable fallout. We’d been hiding who we were, what we felt for each other. I’d had enough pretending. No more.

As I passed back through the temple grounds, my thoughts strayed to Theo Drakharrow. He was a Drakharrow, yes, but he’d been brave enough to love a blightborn and to be open about it. I wondered what his family had had to say about that.

Then there was Regan. The pull I felt was as strong and undeniable as the bond I already shared with Lysander. It wasn’t choice. It wasn’t logic. It was fate. Something far greater and more powerful than any house or doctrine. The three of us were meant for one another. Now all we had to do was make Regan see it, too.

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CHAPTER 34

MEDRA



This is fucking unbearable," I burst out, as soon as we reached Blake's room and shut the door behind us. I'd been staying with Blake since the room I shared with Florence felt far too empty.

"Un-*bear*-able?" Blake asked, his lips twitching.

"Gods, I can't believe you have a sense of humor at a time like this," I snapped, pulling my hair out of its tie and letting it fall loose around my shoulders. I cracked my neck, trying to relieve some tension.

"The dwarves are here. Nyxaris is gone. We can't tell them where Nyxaris is gone," I said listing our quandaries.

"Well, we could tell them. But they won't like it."

"Very helpful. Zaira looks like she'd like nothing better than to murder us all."

"And poor Rodriguez isn't the only member of the Emberwatch, his secret order," Blake supplied.

My lips twitched. "That part is a little funny." I snorted. "So secret the rest of the order didn't even know he was a member."

"You forgot the talking bear that wants to murder me," Blake commented.

"Hawl won't murder you," I said dismissively.

"Not when you're looking, anyhow."

"Better watch your back, Drakharrow," I quipped. "Oh look, just like the old days." But when I looked at him properly, I saw that despite his attempts at humor, his face was strained. His shoulders were too tight. "What happened at the Sanctum before I got there? What did you learn?"

Blake strolled over to a side table and poured himself a drink. "Nothing good."

I walked up behind him and set my palms on his shoulders. “Tell me.” I leaned my face against his back, breathing in the scent of him. He turned to face me, and I saw the glass in his hand was already empty. “Should you be drinking when …”

“When what?” He put the glass down and poured himself a second drink.

I sighed. “What’s going on, Blake?”

“You mean, besides the entire world being fucked to shit?”

“Yes, that,” I said flatly.

He looked at me. “I’m surprised you’re so calm. That you’re—”

“That I’m what?”

“That you’re not furious at me, Pendragon,” he said, his voice sharper now, like he couldn’t hold it back anymore. “That you aren’t angry at me every moment of every day.”

“How would that possibly help?” I shook my head. “None of this is your fault.”

“Some of it is certainly my fucking fault.” His voice was rough. “Like the fact that I can’t even take you to find Florence.”

I bit my lip. “Not your fault.” I knew if I let him have that, he’d drown in the guilt.

“You’re my rider, but you’ve never even flown on my back. I’m a pathetic excuse for a dragon.” He tried to chuckle. “No wonder you shot me.”

I touched his jaw. “Blake.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re an idiot.” I slid my hand down to the base of his neck, forcing him to dip his head down just a little. “Look at me, Blake. You’re a dragon. We have another dragon on our side. Do you know how amazing that is? Nyxaris is gone, but we have you.” I took a deep breath. “Yes, everything that’s happening is … a lot. But on the plus side, everything is going exactly how Nyxaris said it would.”

“Is it?” His hands moved to my waist. He leaned in, mouth brushing the side of my throat. Hardly a touch, barely a question. “Tell me more.”

“How can you …”

“How can I want you right now?” His voice was low, with a familiar wicked edge. “I will never stop wanting you, Pendragon. You’re lucky I didn’t lay you down on that boardroom table.”

I wanted to laugh but suddenly couldn't breathe. "In front of the dwarves?" I managed to say.

"In front of all the fucking dwarves," he murmured. "In front of everyone." His gaze lifted to mine. "Would you have liked that? Me fucking you in public with everyone watching? Because I think the refectory is still open …"

My mind was spinning. Florence was gone. Nyxaris was gone. Florence was probably … I couldn't let myself go there. If I did, I'd be lost. I pushed Blake back, needing space, and moved to lean against his desk.

"Stick to the plan, Pendragon. Don't go there," Blake said softly, watching me.

"I can't help it," I whispered. "It's been days."

"There is nothing you can do for her here, now, in this moment. You are exactly where you need to be. Trust the plan."

There was a lump in my throat. "It's so hard to believe that."

"You could not have gone with Nyxaris. You are not his rider." His voice was harsh. "Tell me you understand that."

I jerked my head. "Yes. I do." I knew I was torturing more than just myself, and I didn't want that. I truly didn't.

"Then, stop thinking about it." He ran his hands through his hair.

"What did you learn about your mother?" I asked, knowing he was trying to redirect and trying to hide something all at the same time. Blake went very still. I looked him over. He was dressed simply tonight: white short-sleeved cotton shirt, no Drakharrow insignia, no Bloodwing crest. Black trousers that fit him perfectly and gave him what felt like an unfair advantage.

He caught me looking and raised a brow. "Like what you see?"

"Always," I said simply. "You're beautiful."

Something hungry passed across his face. Not just desire. He needed to be seen as more than the tragedy he feared he still was. More than a disaster spinning out of control. Something in my heart clenched. "Keep feeding me lines like that and you might just get lucky tonight, Miss Pendragon," he murmured.

The way he said my name made my pulse instantly jump. It was just a silly game, but the way he could suddenly dial up the authority was an immediate turnon. His eyes went to the desk like he'd just remembered something. I saw him half smile. Then he reached down, opened a drawer,

and pulled out a pair of thin black glasses. He slid them on … and my lungs forgot how to breathe. “Since when do you wear glasses?” I choked.

He looked down his nose at me through the lenses, and I made a strangled sound. I didn’t know how he was doing it, but Blake made scholarly little glasses look practically obscene. “I suggest you watch that disrespectful tone, Miss Pendragon, or it’ll earn you a detention.”

He peeled his white shirt off, tossing it straight into the hamper. Because Professor Blake Drakharrow wasn’t the kind of man who left dirty clothes laying around on the floor. I licked my lips without thinking, and his gaze tracked the movement, like I was following a command he’d just given me. *Shit.*

“Careful, Miss Pendragon,” he said softly, a predatory look in his gray eyes. He tilted his head, and his glasses flashed in the lamp-light. “You’re distracting the class. Apologize. Now.”

“I beg your pardon. How rude of me.” Then I did it again, slower this time.

He crossed the space between us quickly. One moment I had air. The next, he was between my thighs, palms flat on the desk on either side of me, locking me in. He paused, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose with one finger, slowly and deliberately. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. “I think a lesson in discipline is in order, Miss Pendragon,” he murmured, his mouth grazing mine. “Say *Yes, Professor Drakharrow*.”

My breath caught. “Yes, Professor Drakharrow.”

His hands tangled in my hair, yanking my head back. I gasped. “Good girl,” he whispered. Then his fangs found my neck. I moaned, my body instantly filling up with heat. His body was flush against mine, and I could feel the length of his cock pressing hard against my stomach through his trousers as he drank. When he broke his fangs away, he was breathing hard. My blood rimmed his lips. “Now, why don’t you tell me what you need, Miss Pendragon.”

“What I need?” My voice cracked. “How about five minutes where it’s just you and me without all the world’s troubles breaking through?”

Something in his face softened slightly. Then it was gone, and he was back in control. “Then, you’re going to do exactly what I tell you, Miss Pendragon. You’re going to let me distract you.”

“That sounds like an order … sir,” I whispered.

His mouth brushed mine. “It absolutely is.” Then he kissed me properly. He took my mouth as if he meant to silence every spiraling thought in my head. I tasted my own blood on his lips, rich and metallic, mixing with the scent and taste of him. My hands fisted in his hair, and he made a low sound against my lips—approval, possession, relief.

Our bond might have been messy and just a little fucked up. But in the end, it was a beautiful thing. We fed each other. We nurtured each other. Not only one another’s bodies but one another’s souls. I knew Blake wasn’t going to tell me about his mother, not until after. So that meant it must be really bad. I knew he didn’t want to think about it right now. Like me, he needed a moment to breathe.

My hands slid up his chest, over the hard line of his collarbone, to the back of his neck, holding him against me. Everything else was gone. There was only his mouth. The low sound of desire he made when I tugged him in closer. Sometimes we kissed sweet, and sometimes we kissed hungry. This was a hungry kiss. *Sweet* didn’t begin to describe it.

When Blake finally broke his mouth away, his hands slid under my ass, lifting me up from the desk and standing me up on the floor. It had been a good day to wear a knee-length dress, I thought hazily, as Blake’s hands skimmed over my thighs and up and over the curve of my ass. I wasn’t usually a dress kind of a girl, but today was the highblood meeting. I’d been thinking of Florence. I knew she’d have told me to dress to impress.

I watched Blake; he watched me watching him. “Eyes on me,” he commanded. “That’s an order.” He yanked off the little piece of black lace covering me and slid it to the floor, then exhaled hot breath over my sensitive flesh, sending goose bumps spreading over my skin. Firm hands steered me until my hips hit the edge of the desk again. Blake’s hands were moving under my dress, cupping my full breasts and toying with my nipples. His tongue slid over my center in a slow, long lick, and I gasped. “Hold onto the desk, Miss Pendragon,” he commanded, “because you’re about to come utterly undone.”

He probably wasn’t wrong about that, I decided. Then his wicked mouth swept over my pussy and pleasure erupted from my center. I could think about nothing else. I writhed, feeling him lapping up my wetness, his tongue buried inside me. Then he moved back, mouth trapping my clit between his lips and sucking as he slipped two fingers inside me.

“Oh, fuck,” I gasped.

“That’s *Oh, fuck, Professor*,” he murmured from between my legs. He rocked his mouth against me as he licked and sucked, fingers thrusting in and out.

A moment passed, then another, and then I was crying out, hands gripping the desk tight as I pushed back against Blake’s mouth, waves of white-hot pleasure exploding within me. He stood up, mouth moving to cover mine. I could taste my arousal on his lips, mixed with the fading taste of my blood.

“Everything about you is so fucking delicious,” he breathed against my lips.

The sound of him undoing his belt made the wetness pool between my thighs again.

“You’re wet for me again already, aren’t you, Miss Pendragon?” he demanded. I moaned, knowing he could smell me. He slipped a finger between my legs, gliding it over the moisture, and his eyes gleamed. “Just as I thought. Sopping wet for my cock.”

I whimpered in anticipation of the feeling of him between my legs. “Professor Drakharrow … please.”

“Patience, Miss Pendragon …” Then, “Shit.”

A cold feeling spiked through me. “Blake?”

His eyes had gone wide. They were redder than ever. “It’s happening.”

I looked down and I saw it: crimson scales spreading over his forearms like embers. His breathing was coming fast. His face had gone pale. I could see his composure cracking. “Shit,” he said again, his voice full of panic. “I can feel it. I don’t know if I can—”

“Yes, you can,” I snapped. “Keep it together just a moment longer. You can do that. Come with me.” I slid off the desk, quickly grabbing one of Blake’s sweaters from a drawer. It was long enough to cover at least the tops of my thighs. I grabbed his hand, desperately trying to ground him. “Follow me, Professor.”

His gaze was hopeful. “What? Where?”

“Roof. Now.”

I pulled him out into the hallway and up the spiral stairs. We passed a few students who stared at my unconventional attire and Blake’s bare chest. A few whispers followed us, but I didn’t care. I knew I couldn’t let Blake lose control inside the tower.

We burst through the rooftop door and out into air so cold it stole my breath. Around us, the ocean sprawled, dark and endless. Blake staggered behind me. He braced both hands on his knees, breathing hard. Then his shoulders jerked. Behind him, huge shadows unfurled as wings, large and crimson, snapping out suddenly with a force that pushed the air away in a gust. My hair whipped into my face. I gasped, stumbling, then steadied myself.

Blake lifted his head. His eyes burned red, but his gaze was focused. Controlled. The glasses were still on his face, which should have been absurd but somehow wasn't. Professor Drakharrow standing on a rooftop with wings and scholarly spectacles.

"How do you feel?" I demanded.

He swallowed hard and straightened up, his wings flexing like they'd always been there. I couldn't take my eyes off them. They were immense—and beautiful.

"I feel good," he rasped. "I think … I think I can stop like this. I don't have to change all the way."

"But do you want to?" I asked. Because the truth was, I didn't want him to stop any of it. He looked raw, stripped down—but also sure of himself in a way that made me proud.

His gaze slid over my body like a caress, and I shivered despite the sweater I was wearing. "I want you," he said simply. "I won't hurt you." His voice was hard as iron. "Do you believe that?"

I stepped closer until the wind couldn't wedge itself between us. Heat radiated off his body. The red of his wings contrasted against the black sky like a burning banner. "I believe you. I know you will never hurt me." I rose on my toes and kissed him.

He shuddered like I'd just given him permission. Then his hands found my waist, tight but careful, like he didn't trust his own strength. The kiss turned deeper, hotter, hungry enough that I felt my knees going weak. Blake's wings twitched behind him, reacting to the kiss like another set of nerves. I suddenly wondered how they'd feel to touch, to run my hands over.

Blake pulled back a fraction, mouth hovering over mine as his hands found the hem of the sweater I wore and yanked it over my head.

"Are we really doing this here?" I breathed.

He didn’t answer. His gaze raked over my naked body. Then his hands cupped my breasts, rubbing his thumbs over my nipples and turning them into hard, throbbing buds.

“Fuck,” I whimpered.

“Tell me you want this, Miss Pendragon,” he said, unbuckling his belt for the second time and shucking his trousers off.

My pulse jumped. The wetness between my legs grew as I watched him wrap his palm around the length of his cock and stroke its length, riveted by the beads of moisture on the tip.

I nibbled my bottom lip. “I want this.” His eyes narrowed. “I want this, Professor,” I amended.

“Good,” he murmured, stepping toward me. His mouth brushed my jaw. “Now you’re going to hold on.” His hands pushed my legs apart and one finger slipped inside to thrust with a slow, excruciating rhythm as I moaned.

“Hold on?” I echoed, breathlessly, as my hands gripped his shoulders. “What does that mean?”

I pushed back against his hand, needing more—and saw his wings rising up behind him, twitching back and forth, as if restless for what happened next. “Blake,” I breathed, “your wings …”

“Do you want me to stop?”

I swallow, my pulse pounding. “No. But …” I was losing the ability to think clearly. His wings flexed again, and this time the movement didn’t seem accidental. “Professor Drakharrow, maybe we should go back inside.” But I didn’t really want to stop. Not when his hands were so warm on me. Not when we both had spent so long feeling trapped.

His mouth brushed mine, as his thumb stroked my clit. I grasped his shoulders, trying not to slide down onto the parapet in a puddle of lust. His voice was a low scrape against my lips. “Time to get us away from prying eyes, Miss Pendragon. We wouldn’t want to make the other students jealous, now, would we?”

My heart hammered. “Are you really going to pretend this is in any way practical? Safe?”

He pulled off his glasses and tossed them onto the pile of our discarded clothing. “Practical, Miss Pendragon? I assure you, all of my classes are extremely practical. And when the hell have you ever chosen *safe*?”

Then his wings beat—just one powerful sweep, and the roof dropped away.

My stomach lurched. I heard myself making a sound that was half scream, half laugh. My fingers clawed at his shoulders. Blake held me tight, anchoring my body against his as we rose, the tower and the sea shrinking below us, the wind roaring in my ears. His wings caught the air as if they'd always belonged there, as if he'd always known exactly what to do. Like he'd been waiting for this his whole life. For all I knew, maybe he had.

I clung to him. "You're insane, Professor Drakharrow," I gasped. "You're going to drop me, and I'm going to die."

"Insane? Probably," he murmured, pressing his forehead to mine. "But you're not going to fall. I've got you. I've never lost a student."

"What if someone sees?" I gasped, feeling his cock, hard and throbbing between us. All I wanted was him inside me. Shame was falling away fast, just like the buildings down below and all the people who suddenly seemed to matter less and less with every passing second.

"What about them? Let them see you being claimed by me, Miss Pendragon," he growled against my ear. "Do you think anyone else will ever fuck you like this? Fuck you up high, amid the very heavens themselves?"

His mouth found mine again, claiming me fiercely. There we were, suspended between sea and sky, disaster and desire. And Blake kissed me as if he could keep us from falling with sheer lust alone. His wings moved around us, steady and powerful, each beat a reminder of his true strength. Each beat a promise he was keeping. The fear in my chest loosened enough for me to breathe, and we disappeared up into the cloud cover, away from the school and any watching eyes, the night blurring around us. His arms clasped my hips, cradling me against him as his wings beat around us. Then his cock slid into me, and I was clenching around him, calling out his name, arching my body against his.

Every time. Every time I forgot how good he felt inside me.

I screamed, my voice lost to the wind, as I wrapped my legs around him, and he shifted himself between my thighs, thrusting hard, over and over. My teeth grazed his shoulder. My nails raked his skin as I rocked my hips against his.

"Maybe I am a monster, Miss Pendragon," he whispered. "But if I am, I'm your fucking monster."

His fangs sank back into my neck. And then I couldn't say anything at all. He was flying and we were fucking, and in another moment we had

moved out of the bounds of language entirely.



Back in Blake's room later, we lay in a tangle of limbs on the bed. My head rested on his chest, as his hand played with my hair.

"My hair is a mess," I moaned.

"I'll wash it for you later," he said, kissing the top of my head. "And brush it. And braid it."

I laughed. "You know how to braid hair?"

"Of course. I had to braid Aenia's. When my mother was gone, I—" He stopped.

"What happened?" I whispered. "Will you tell me now?"

His hand stilled. "She's gone."

"I'm so sorry, Blake." I flipped onto my stomach and moved closer against him, wrapping my arms around his torso.

"She's gone, but …" He took a deep, ragged breath. "But not gone, exactly."

I lifted my head to look at him. "What does that mean?"

He shook his head. "Shit, Pendragon. I just realized we have something in common I never wanted us to share."

I had a sinking feeling. "What?"

"Your mother. She's not dead. But she's not alive either, right?"

I nodded.

"But at least you can fucking talk to her. She's not …"

"She's not what? What do you mean, Blake?"

He ran a hand over his face and sighed. "They used my mother. They forced her to sacrifice herself. I don't know how exactly they made her do it. But knowing Viktor, well, he probably told her he'd kill Aenia and me if she didn't." He paused. "My mother was a good person, Pendragon. She might have been a highblood, but she was more like Sankara or Allenvale than Viktor or—" He stopped again, and I knew he'd been about to say his father. "If she'd still been around these last few years, well …" He held very still. "Who knows what might have been different?"

"Viktor was afraid of her," I whispered.

Blake nodded. “He must have been. Though, I doubt he’d ever admit it, even to himself. With her gone, he could shape Marcus and me. There was nothing to hold him back.”

“Nothing but the fact that you turned out to have a conscience.”

“Did I? I’m not sure about that. Maybe I grew one when you landed here. Maybe your blood gave me one.”

“No, I think you always had one,” I said softly. “Give yourself more credit.”

He was quiet for a while, stroking my hair. “When you met me, I had little sense of right or wrong left. Just look at how I treated you.”

“No, Blake. I think I’ll look at how you treated Aenia. I’ll look at how you treated Neville when I asked you to help him. How you helped Rodriguez bring supplies to blightborn families who were in need. I think I’ll look at how you were full of highblood arrogance and privilege and an asshole and a bully when it came to me, yes. But you still saved my life in the Consort Games.” I tilted my head up to meet his eyes. “You don’t take pleasure in killing and cruelty. Even though you could.”

“My dragon did,” he said, looking uncomfortable.

“Your dragon is a part of you. Do you hear him as a separate voice now?”

He shook his head. “No. Not since … whatever you and Nev did.”

I felt relieved. “Rodriguez told you that your soul was splitting. It was a hell of a way to fix things, but maybe Vorago really did play a part in, well, making sure you didn’t fucking die before you could learn to manage all of this.”

“You think I’ve got this managed?” he teased. “Just because I didn’t drop you?”

“That and a few other impressive things,” I teased back. “What do you think? Do you feel like you could shift again at will if you had to?”

After our little midair dalliance, he’d brought me back to the tower window, and I’d climbed back in. Then Blake had transformed fully. He’d gone for a test flight. I wasn’t sure if anyone had spotted him flying. At this point, it probably didn’t really matter, not now that he was finally getting real control.

I knew the next time he flew, I’d finally be on his back. Never in a million years would I have guessed when I’d landed in Sangratha and met Blake Drakharrow that I’d actually become a real dragon rider. Or that

Blake would wind up not only my betrothed but the very dragon I was bound to.

He blushed a little. “Probably. I think so.”

“Then, you know what that means,” I said, with a grimace.

The knock at the door was perfect timing—or the very worst.

“Let’s pretend we’re sleeping,” Blake whispered.

I closed my eyes and faked a snore. He chuckled.

“Miss Pendragon? Lord Drakharrow? I can hear you in there, you know.”

“Do dwarves have superior hearing?” Blake whispered. Aloud, he called, “*Lord Drakharrow* is my uncle, Zaira.”

“Very well. *Mr. Drakharrow*, then. Or do you prefer Black Prince as your title?”

“Fuck, I hate that title,” Blake grumbled. “I managed to get them to stop using it at the school. Where the hell did she hear it?”

“I have a feeling Zaira knows a lot of things about us that we don’t realize—and that she shouldn’t,” I said with resignation.

“Or perhaps *Professor* is more in order?” Zaira called more loudly from the other side of the door.

Blake’s face was hysterical.

“Oh gods,” I gasped. “Does that mean she was here earlier?”

“First Stone Keeper? First Head Witch is more like it,” Blake complained, as he scrambled out of bed and searched for a pair of pants. “The woman is insufferable. Whatever she heard, she deserved to hear. She shouldn’t have been eavesdropping,” he said, raising his voice a little.

From behind the door, Zaira had gone silent again. I tried not to giggle too much as I pulled on one of Blake’s wool sweaters and a pair of leggings. Blake had set aside a drawer for me, and I’d left a few things at his place.

There was another knock. Louder and more insistent. “I really must insist you open this door. It’s a matter of some urgency.”

“Coming, coming,” Blake called. He strode to the door and yanked it open. “Well, well. What a pleasure to see you twice in one day, First Stone Keeper.”

Zaira sniffed. “Yes, well, if you don’t mind, perhaps we can have this conversation elsewhere.”

“You don’t want to come in?” Blake said, baring his fangs a little. “You wound me, Zaira. I promise I don’t bite.”

The dark-haired woman’s eyes widened slightly, then she frowned. “I don’t frighten easily, Mr. Drakharrow. I can assure you of that.”

Blake grinned. “No, I can see that. So, what can we do for you?”

“Are we really going to stand speaking here in the doorway where anyone can hear?” Zaira looked annoyed. “Very well.” She looked at Blake, then glanced over at me. “I saw a red dragon flying through the skies earlier this evening.”

“Did you? How fascinating. Wonder who it was. Maybe Viktor flew back from the Bonewood,” Blake drawled.

“Stop playing games, Mr. Drakharrow,” Zaira snapped. “Is there something you’d like to share with me? Need I remind you the fate of our entire world may rest upon the answer you give?”

“Way to pressure a man,” Blake mumbled.

I walked over to the doorway, slipping a hand around Blake’s waist as he draped his arm over my shoulders. “There are two Inferni dragons in Sangratha.” I waited a moment, letting myself enjoy the stunned look on her face, then added, “Blake is the second.”

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CHAPTER 35

REGAN



I looked out the tower window. Down below, on the hills, students were walking back up from a class in the greenhouse. The sun was shining, reflecting off the silver sea. In the distance, a ship moved slowly across the horizon. How could the world still be doing such ordinary things?

I moved away from the window and back to the bed. The room they'd put me in was lovely, all pale whites and shimmering silvers. I was used to Drakharrow colors, deep reds and darkest blacks. I lay back down on my bed. The frame was low and carved from a pale wood bleached nearly white. I pulled the thick quilt over me, a silver satin that reminded me of moonlit water. The air was clean. It smelled fresh and of sea spray and freedom.

Kage and Lysander had brought me here that first day. They hadn't taken me to the infirmary but made the healers come to me instead, somehow knowing I wouldn't want to be seen by students. The Avari Tower was safe, they'd promised. The tower had been warded. No one could hurt me. No one would bother me here except the healers. They came every morning without fail. They checked my bruises and cuts. They clucked over my incisions. They bandaged my wrists where the chains had rubbed my skin raw. Healer Elycia's face had been grim when she'd seen my throat, still grimmer when she'd seen the state of my thighs. The burns there hadn't healed, but the worst of the pain was gone, replaced by an aching tightness that flared when I moved too quickly. They'd fade, but not completely. Dragon fire, Elycia told me, didn't like to let go. It was a miracle the burns hadn't become infected, she said. A miracle I was still alive. My body was healing. It knew what to do, even if my mind didn't.

She’d been very kind. But after a few days, I stopped opening the door when a healer came. After a few more, I stopped bringing in the trays of food. Instead, I lay in the bed, replaying things over and over. As if there was some way I could go back and change things with enough repetition. If I ran it through enough times, could I find the moment I’d missed? The fraction of a second where I might have made a different choice?

I was here. But Florence Shen was still in chains. I closed my eyes. It should have been me in her place. It had already been too late for me; I hadn’t been worth saving. But Florence … The girl was innocent; you only had to look at her to see that. She wasn’t used to pain or cruelty. I could take it, but she’d break like a dry branch.

I rolled onto my side, staring at the sky through the window. A knock sounded at the door. It was late afternoon, so it probably wasn’t a healer. I didn’t move. The knock came again. “Go away,” I called, trying to speed things up.

“Regan. Please, will you open the door?” I recognized the voice. Lysander Orphos.

Something in my throat tightened at the thought of him. A complicated knot wedged there, made up of resentment mixed with gratitude. He’d saved me. How dare he save me? Why hadn’t he saved Florence?

The latch clicked. I knew I’d locked it. The door swung open. I sat up, pushing myself back against the headboard, pulling the quilt up to my chin. “Get out.”

“I won’t come any closer.” Lysander’s voice was soft.

I’d always thought him soft in every way. Strange like all the Orphos were. Then he’d come for me. Fought for me. Now … now I wasn’t so sure. I studied him for a moment. His hair was much longer than Kage’s. He had half of it piled up in a bun. He was as tall as Kage, yet more graceful in the way he moved. His features were fine-boned, delicate yet sharp. High cheekbones. A long straight nose. A small cleft in his chin. His eyes were a clear sky-blue, framed by unbelievably long light brown lashes. There was, I realized, feeling oddly disarmed, a sensuality to his mouth I’d never noticed. A smolder beneath the calm exterior.

If Kage was pure wolf, predatory and powerful, then Lysander was something else entirely.

His sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, and on one of his forearms I could see a strip of bandages poking out. He’d been wounded. I suddenly

remembered him standing on the parapet with his hands outstretched as I fell. I shuddered, pulling the blanket up closer to my chin. “Please just go away, Lysander.”

“There are no healers with me. No one is outside. I’m alone.”

I stared at him from the bed. “All right.”

“You’ve been refusing to eat.”

“So what? I’m sure the school will survive the tragedy.”

“You mean, if you died?” He shook his head. “That’s not going to happen.”

“Oh no?” I said dully.

“No. You’re stronger than that. You didn’t survive just to starve to death like a wild animal caught in a trap.” He met my eyes. “You’re *not* trapped, Regan.” He gestured to the room. “If this room is not to your liking—”

“It’s fine,” I said automatically.

He nodded. “The healers … they were hoping to continue to treat your burns.”

“They’ll heal or they won’t. One way or another.” I shrugged. “What’s another scar or two?” I looked away, toward the window. “I don’t want to be touched anymore. I don’t want to be looked at.”

The silence stretched. “That’s … understandable.”

I looked back at him. “You were in my dreams. The voice I heard. It was yours?” He nodded slowly. “Why didn’t you tell me your name? I would have recognized you.” I swallowed. “I thought I was going mad.”

He looked stricken. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think …”

“Didn’t think what?”

He shifted on his feet, crossing his arms over his chest. His shirt was linen and a pale lilac. I’d always been fond of the color. I’d even worn it sometimes, despite being in Drakharrow. The collar of his shirt was open, and I could see golden hairs curling against his skin. I looked away. “I didn’t think you’d want to hear from an Orphos.”

“Oh.”

“Do you know how rare it is? To be able to be reached in dreams like that?”

I shook my head. “I assumed it was just some trick you learn in your house.”

He smiled slightly. “No. I tried to reach you many times. I only succeeded a few. The place they had you in was well-warded. But despite

that …”

“Despite that what?”

“I managed to get through.”

“Well, you must be very talented.”

His mouth twisted. “Or you are.”

I gave a dry laugh. “I have no talents. Now, Florence Shen on the other hand, she can ride a dragon. You should have saved her, not me.”

He didn’t flinch. “We tried to save you both. Florence isn’t lost, not yet.”

“You don’t know that. What else would you call it when Viktor has her?”

“There is always hope, Regan.”

“That’s bullshit,” I said evenly. “And you know it.”

“I know we want to protect you, Kage and I,” he said quietly. “We brought you here to keep you safe.”

“Why?” I demanded. “Because Kage thinks he owes me that?” I thought of what Viktor had claimed—that Kage and I were mates. I closed my eyes. Whatever I had felt for Kage Tanaka had been a dream. That dream was dead now.

“Go away,” I said tiredly. “I need to sleep.”

He hesitated. “Terrible things have happened to you. Things you didn’t deserve. But you still have the right to live—and to be happy.” I gave him a sour look but said nothing. His gaze was steady. “It’s true, Regan. Don’t let Viktor steal that away. That’s exactly what he wanted.”

It was so easy for him to say. “You know what? Go fuck yourself, Lysander.” I turned over in the bed and pulled the quilt over my head. I heard footsteps. Then the latch clicked. “Go away, go away, go away,” I whispered, tears pricking my eyes. But in my heart, I wish he’d stayed. I didn’t want to be touched. I didn’t want to be looked at. But my mind was a stupid, contradictory thing. Deep down, I didn’t really want to be alone.

I heard a faint shuffling sound. I pushed the quilt off and jerked upright, looking toward the door. But it was still closed. Footsteps padded closer. I looked down at the floor. Blake’s fluffin stood there, looking as if he’d been there the entire time. He was so small. Mostly fur. His tail was nearly as long as his whole body; it was a deep reddish-orange. But the fur on his chest, just under his head, was a creamy white—like a ruff of snow. It looked impossibly soft. His eyes were huge and round. They gleamed gold, reminding me of a dragon’s. The animal blinked at me.

“How did you—” I stopped. What did it matter?

But I didn’t tell him to go away. I leaned back against the bed. I really did feel exhausted. The fluffin and I stared at one another. Then, after a moment, he hopped onto the bed with a little thump. He stood by my feet, looking at me for a long time, his head tilted slightly. Then he padded a little closer and sat down beside my leg, near enough that I could feel his warmth through the blanket. The pressure against my burns might have hurt, but it didn’t. It felt … oddly nice. The warmth increased, like a heating pad.

The fluffin stared up at me. I was suddenly scared to move, afraid I might frighten the little thing away. A few more moments passed. The little creature didn’t look away.

“Do you want something?” I whispered. Slowly, I lifted my hand. I let my fingers drop to the fluffin’s fur very gently. I stroked. His fur was dense and silky. I patted him again, a little more confidently. His eyes half-closed. I felt him start to purr, his body rumbling with contentment like a cat’s. The sound was incredibly gratifying. Something inside my chest untightened just a little.

I slid down the bed, curling my legs around the fluffin very carefully and resting my head on the pillow. I stroked the warm, soft fur. The purring sound had changed. It still wasn’t loud, more of a hum. The steady, soothing vibrations seemed to sink into my bones. My eyelids felt heavy.

I kept moving my fingers gently over the fluffin’s fur, slowly and carefully. I had a pet once, a long time ago. I’d loved it so much I hadn’t wanted to let it out of my sight. But I was young, and no one had taught me how to take care of an animal. It had died. And it had been my fault.

Tears slid down my face. I looked into the fluffin’s golden eyes. “I’m sorry.”

His little tongue darted out, pink and sweet. It brushed against my hand. The feeling was strange, rough, a little like sandpaper, but not unpleasant. The humming sound deepened. I closed my eyes and exhaled shakily. It felt like the first real breath I’d taken in days. The fluffin pressed his warm little body closer. A strange, bright thought surfaced in my mind. Persis and I, chasing each other in the snow. The image didn’t hurt.

My eyelids felt heavier. I’d been fighting sleep for so many nights. The nightmares had been so bad. But now, the fluffin’s hum wrapped around my fears and smoothed them all away. I thought of the pain I’d seen on Lysander’s face. The inexplicable way he seemed to care. Why did he care?

I thought of the wolf, catching me in his jaws as I fell, his teeth so sharp and yet somehow so gentle.

The room started to blur at the edges. Outside, the waves crashed harmlessly against the shore. For the first time since I'd left the fortress, I drifted into sleep, my palm still sunk into the fluffin's coat. And as I drifted, I let myself realize something I must have known for days: there was a wolf standing guard outside my door.

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CHAPTER 36

FLORENCE



I’d had a pretty good life. It hadn’t been long enough, short by blightborn and highblood standards. But it had been a life full of love. I clung to those memories now the way I might have clung to a piece of wood in a stormy ocean, refusing to be swept under, refusing to drown.

My father’s voice when he’d read stories to me. The smell of tea steeping in our kitchen. The look on my mother’s and father’s faces as they’d watched each other when they’d thought I wasn’t looking. My mother’s laugh. Her stubbornness. Her brilliance. The way she’d risen in her career—and would probably keep rising. Her unquenchable thirst for knowledge. I hoped she’d always have that. I hoped books and learning would still be a comfort to her when I was gone.

I thought of Bloodwing that first day. How adoringly I’d looked up at the towers. How excited I’d been to go to the very best school in the realm. I’d been so nervous, so eager to prove I belonged there, so afraid someone would find out I didn’t. Now I knew the truth. Bloodwing was my home because I’d claimed it. No one could take it away from me, not even highbloods. I’d grown into myself there. I’d made the very dearest of friends.

Medra’s face rose in my mind. I pictured her infectious grin. I thought of her stubbornness and her impossible courage. I’d met her that first day and thought she’d soon be running with the most popular students at the school. I’d known she was special, that she’d stand out wherever she went. She wasn’t like me, not at all. But she’d chosen me. We’d chosen each other. She loved me like a sister, and I loved her. I was so proud of her. So proud of her bravery. The way she never, ever gave up. I wished I could tell her that. I had to hope she knew.

Naveen. He'd left us so soon, that very first year. He'd been sweet and kind and funny. He'd loved music and … well, maybe he'd loved me. I would never know what might have been. He was gone, and that door had closed before I'd had a chance to even peek behind it.

Nyxaris. I'd been so afraid of him. But he and Medra had given me a second chance at life. If it hadn't been for them, I'd have died that night in the courtyard. But because of them, I'd had an extra year. A year to learn, a year to love. A year to fly. I remembered the first time I'd climbed onto Nyxaris's back. My legs had been shaking. My heart had been stuttering. My hands had been so sweaty. I'd been certain I was going to fall off and die. But I hadn't. I'd learned. Nyxaris had taught me, and together we'd soared.

We'd stopped a city from being destroyed. We'd done that, he and I. My dragon and I, his rider. We'd saved hundreds of lives. People were out there now who might not have lived through that night if we hadn't done what we'd done. And then there was the field. That terrible moment when I thought I'd lost him. And then the burst of light as he had returned to me and changed into the man I loved. He'd looked at me with reverence in his eyes, as if I were something sacred and beautiful and pure.

I'd loved him before I'd even known he was a man. And if he'd never changed, I would have had my dreams. They would have been enough for me. But instead, I'd had love. I'd had his touch. His protection. I'd had the chance to tell him I loved him—and to know he loved me.

The memories were so bright they hurt. They were the vines with which I built my garden walls high, placing them one by one like you might lay stones to build a bridge.

But when I opened my eyes, I saw iron bars and rough stone. Around me were other cells filled with children. Someone was always crying. But the saddest part to me was that most of the children were silent. They'd given up crying. They'd given up hoping. All they could do now was wait. I looked out at the cell across the hall from mine. A little girl's face stared back at me through the bars, her face streaked with dirt. She was a highblood child, but it didn't matter what she was. She was just a little girl, and she didn't deserve to be here.

I knew that whatever they were going to do to me next, they wouldn't care if the children heard it. Whenever they took someone, we could all hear what happened next. The begging and the screams. They wanted the

sound to travel. They wanted the screams to turn our hope to dust. The children were more obedient that way.

I took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, forcing my body to be calm. I would be calm, and I would be brave. Not because I really was brave, but because the children would be listening. And because my screams were the only thing I had left that they couldn't take without my permission. They would have my body. They would have my pain. Maybe they really would even have my soul. But up until that moment, that very last moment when they did whatever they were going to do, I would still be me. I would hold onto myself until then. I wouldn't break.

I'd already had plenty of time to picture it. To imagine what it would feel like to have my will taken away, my thoughts become someone else's. Would there be anything left of me at all when they were through? Would I be watching my body move from somewhere behind my own eyes?

The worst part was what Nyxaris would feel. I put a hand to my throat, trying to fight the panic that was building. He'd already gone through this once before. He would be terrified for me. He would feel so much pain. In the end, maybe that was the worst part of this, knowing he'd be in pain and that there would be nothing I could do, nothing I could say. We'd had our last moments together, and we hadn't even known it.

Tears pricked my eyes. It wasn't fair. It was hard and cruel and so terribly unfair.

I looked across the hall at the little girl. It was unfair for us all, not just for me. Not just for Nyxaris. I'd already told the children I had a dragon. I'd told them he would come for us. That when he got here, he would save us all, and we would take the children away and find their families and make them safe. They hadn't believed me, of course. Maybe they even thought I was mad.

I studied the little girl's face. Maybe she believed me a little. Sometimes I thought there was still something hopeful in her eyes. But other times, I felt guilty for saying anything to the children at all. Because the truth was I was pretty sure Nyxaris was going to be too late. I knew he couldn't possibly be dead—or else why would they still have wanted me? But he didn't know where I was. And time was cruel. And Viktor Drakharrow had been planning this for probably far longer than I'd even been alive.

Somewhere in the distance, a door opened and clanged shut. Footsteps echoed along the hall. Some of the children started to wail. I watched the

little girl press back from the bars. I wanted to tell her not to worry. That they weren't coming for children today.

My heart beat faster. This was it.

I would be brave. Right up to the last moment. For the children. For Medra. For my mother. For Nyxaris.

But oh, Bloodmaiden. How I wished I could have heard my dragon's voice in my head one last time.

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CHAPTER 37

BLAKE



Bloodwing Academy

A Few Days Earlier

I stared at the man in the doorframe. “Who the hell are you?” A highblood man stood there. I didn’t recognize him, but Pendragon seemed like she did.

“It’s …” She sounded choked-up. I came up behind her, putting my hands on her hips possessively.

I narrowed my eyes, looking at the man. He was tall, well-built. Older than me. Closer to Rodriguez’s age, which meant he had to be even older. There was something familiar about his eyes. They were a bright, clear amber. “Have we met?” I asked bluntly.

He smiled faintly. “We have.”

“Blake.” Medra’s voice was hoarse. “Don’t you see …?” Pendragon looked like she might pass out. Meanwhile, the man was still just standing there smiling—fucking arrogant highblood, always thinking they could have whatever they wanted. Well, I didn’t know what this one wanted, but he wasn’t getting it.

“See what? Whatever you want, you can come back tomorrow. Or, better yet, send a letter.” I reached for the door, intending to shut it in the man’s face.

“Blake.” Pendragon’s hand clutched my arm.

I looked down at her. “All right, will someone please tell me what the fuck is going on?”

The highblood man grimaced. “Look, we all need to talk. I think you’re going to want to hear what I have to say, Blake.”

“Just tell me who the fuck you are,” I demanded.

The man glanced over his shoulder, checking to see if the hall was clear. Then he turned back. “That’s easy. My name is Nyxaris.”

For a second, my mind stopped processing. Then my mouth may have dropped open just a bit. “You’re who?”

“Is it so hard to believe?” His eyes were hard as he met mine. “I’ll give you a second to think about it.”

I did think. “Fuck.”

Medra pulled Nyxaris in and shut the door. “I think we should all sit down.” She sounded flustered—which wasn’t like her, but I didn’t blame her. We took seats around the fire. Medra and I sat side by side on the big red velvet couch, while Nyxaris sat back in my favorite armchair.

I tried not to stare at him. But I couldn’t help it. “You’re really a fucking dragon?”

“You really don’t intend to let your brain catch up to your mouth, do you?” he said mildly.

I choked. “I’m trying.”

He looked at me. “I wouldn’t have thought you of all people would find this hard to take in. We’re two of a kind.”

“Right,” I said, still unnerved and showing it. “Because I’m doing so well with all that.”

Pendragon refused to let us spiral. She leaned forward, eyes locked on Nyxaris’s face. “What happened to you after you were shot?”

His face clouded. “They hit me with Godsbane. Took a rough landing. Came down on the cliffs at the base of the Black Keep, where soldiers soon swarmed me. They’d obviously been waiting. They had ropes and chains.” Medra made a small, furious sound. “They started working to tie me down, pin my wings. I blacked out around then. When I came to, the Godsbane had worn off. They were still trying to fasten my chains.” The dragon looked amused.

“And then?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I snapped the chains. They ran—not fast enough. Guess they hadn’t expected me to wake up so soon.”

I cleared my throat. “Right.”

Nyxaris looked me up and down. “I take it the Vorago problem has been solved?”

My stomach clenched. “Yeah. We handled it.”

He raised a brow. “Did you, now?”

Pendragon was looking back and forth between us. “Can you two stop comparing whose is bigger?”

I choked. “What?”

“Just stop. Both of you, whatever this is. Stop it right now. Florence is gone.” She looked at Nyxaris, and I saw the anger flood her face. “What I don’t understand is why the hell you’re just sitting here.” Nyxaris’s whole body went still. “And yes, you might ask the same of me,” she said bitterly. “But in my case, well—”

I cleared my throat. “I’m having trouble … changing.”

Nyxaris eyed me. I waited for a smart remark or judgment. But all he said was “I see. That makes sense.”

I stared. “It does?”

He nodded. “What Vorago did to you was a complete violation. You were essentially soul-bound.” He was looking at me with curiosity now. “He’s really gone?”

“There’s nothing of Vorago left,” Pendragon said curtly. “I felt him die.”

He shot her an appraising look. “Impressive. I wasn’t sure your plan would work. I thought he’d die, but that Blake would, too.”

“Well, thanks a lot,” I remarked. I glanced at Pendragon. She looked pensive. I wondered if Nyxaris had passed his pessimistic thoughts on to her first. Either way I was glad she’d taken the chance.

“I wasn’t sure it would work either,” she admitted. “Theo’s blood-magic skills came in handy. Not to mention Neville.”

Nyxaris’s face froze. “The fluffin?” She nodded. His face was grim. “You asked why I haven’t left already. The fact of the matter is I don’t know precisely where to go—though, I do have some good guesses. Florence is already too far away for me to communicate with her.”

“You can’t …” She swallowed. “You can’t sense her at all?”

Nyxaris looked away, studying the fire like it was easier than looking at her. “No.”

“We can’t just sit here and do nothing,” Pendragon said, her voice low.

I leaned forward. “I’ll be able to shift again soon. I know I will. As soon as I can fly again, we’ll—”

“Wait. Listen to me first. I’m not here because I gave up,” Nyxaris snapped. “I had to recover and I needed information. Now I know what needs to be done.”

Honestly, it was kind of a fucking relief to hear him say that. Because I sure as hell didn't. But Pendragon didn't seem more at ease. "Just what does Florence mean to you exactly?" she asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" the black dragon demanded. "She's my rider."

"I had to practically beg you to take her as your rider. To save her life," she retorted. "So forgive me if I can't help but wonder if you really see saving her as your top priority right now. Just how far down the list is it?"

Nyxaris was on his feet in an instant. "How fucking dare you. She is my rider."

"Just your rider?" Pendragon goaded. "Is that all?"

"Pendragon," I murmured. "Do you really want to bait the big black dragon?"

But she wouldn't back down. "She's gone," she persisted mercilessly. "And I think everyone here knows exactly what Viktor is going to do to her. What he may have already done."

"You don't think I fucking know that?" Nyxaris roared. "She is not *just* my rider. Stop saying that. She's everything. She is everything to me."

Pendragon got this smug expression on her face. Like she'd been expecting him to say that.

"Right, then." I frowned, suddenly feeling a surge of protectiveness. I stood up, crossing my arms over my chest and met Nyxaris's eyes. "You know, Florence Shen is one of the kindest people I've ever met. Just what are your intentions with her?"

Nyxaris stepped forward. "What are you? Her father?"

"Her father's dead," Pendragon said quietly. "Her mother isn't here. I think Blake has the right to ask."

Nyxaris's face was furious, but he answered. "I would die before I harmed her. Does that satisfy you?"

"I don't think Nyxaris is who we need to worry about, Blake." Pendragon sounded weary.

"Right. I realize that. Viktor is the threat, but I'm just saying once we get Florence back—which we will—if Nyxaris does anything to hurt her then, I will fucking kill him. As long as we all understand that."

Nyxaris looked amused. "Sit down, little hatchling."

I took a seat, albeit awkwardly. "I'm not your fucking hatchling."

“Your protective spirit is noted. As is your threat,” he said quietly. “And as is your vote of confidence. We *will* find her.”

I nodded.

He looked at Medra. “Like I said, I have a plan. I wouldn’t have come here otherwise. I told you I needed more information.”

She looked surprised. “Yes, but—”

“Information which I’ve already acquired,” he said sharply. “Now, both of you need to shut up and listen. We don’t have much time. You’re going to need to do exactly as I say.” Amusement briefly crossed his face again. “And it won’t be easy for you. It will go against both of your natures.”

I wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean, but I decided not to ask.

Pendragon’s jaw tightened. “Tell us.”

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CHAPTER 38

MEDRA



If you are the only dragon at our disposal, the world is far worse off than I feared," Zaira said, looking at Blake with distaste.

I glanced at Blake. He was bare-chested, his hair a mess from the wind, and the expression on his face basically screamed cocky asshole. He arched his brow. "Let's get one thing clear. I'm not at your *disposal*."

"You'd let the world go up in smoke," she snapped, "rather than lift a finger to help it?"

"Finger, claw." He chuckled, then narrowed his eyes. "I didn't say that either, did I?"

Zaira's mouth tightened. "You have been blessed with a great gift."

"Oh, is that what it is?" he snapped. "I thought it was more like a curse. Thanks to this so-called gift, many innocent people are dead."

Her eyes blazed. "You are afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Blake snarled. "I'm simply tired of being used. And let me warn you, Zaira, the last time someone tried to use me, it didn't go very well."

Zaira looked between us. "Tell me about this last time."

"Blake is the one who destroyed Veilmar," I said quietly. Zaira blanched and started to back up.

"Zaira, wait. It's not what you think." I quickly gave her the Vorago story —the short version. When I was through, Zaira still looked wary.

Blake sighed and held up his hands. "I'm cured now, I swear. I'm not going to set anyone on fire."

She pursed her lips. "I suppose I have no choice but to trust that it is true. Because you are the key."

"So I was right. Only a dragon can reach these eggs?" I asked.

She hesitated. “Two creatures are needed to access the place they are hidden.”

My pulse quickened a little. Obviously, she wasn’t telling us everything.

“The moot is a front, as I said. Some of the dwarves in our party *will* meet with the highbloods. But as for Dinesh and me, we will initiate the Quest for the Bloodmaiden’s Reliquary,” she continued.

“The what now?” Blake asked, frowning. “That sounds like a children’s story I had to read in the temple on Sundays.”

Zaira’s lips twitched. “Quests and dragons are in dwarven children’s stories as well,” she admitted. “But this is no mere child’s tale. The story is how we move mountains without beginning a war between our two nations.”

Blake scratched his chin. “Literal mountains or figurative ones?”

“Oh, will you please put a shirt on?” Zaira demanded, waving a hand at him. “I cannot take you seriously like this, dragon or not.”

Blake looked annoyed. “This is my room.”

“Blake,” I said gently.

He exhaled. “For fuck’s sake. Fine.” Muttering under his breath he moved to a tall dresser and pulled a black T-shirt out. He dragged it on. By the time he was through, his hair was even more of a spiky mess. I hid a smile. “So these eggs were actually the Bloodmaiden’s?” Blake asked as he tugged the shirt down. “That’s weird, isn’t it? I don’t remember learning anything about that in history class.”

“Of course they were not hers,” Zaira snapped. “They are dragon eggs, as I have said. The Reliquary is merely the name we have given to the quest to hide its real intentions.”

I snorted. “Right. Like Elaria’s going to believe that.”

“She will not have a choice,” Zaira said imperiously, reminding me suddenly of my mother. “Only an approved squad will be permitted belowground.”

Blake raised his eyebrows. “Two things. One, a squad? Really?”

“That is the language you use at this school, is it not? The units you are meant to be sorting yourselves into for combat?”

“Yes, but we haven’t exactly been following a normal curriculum lately,” I pointed out. I glanced at Blake curiously. “What’s the second thing?”

“The second thing is that you, Zaira, would make an abysmal teacher. The way you drip-feed us information is infuriating. Please tell me you

won’t be accompanying us on this quest,” Blake complained.

She narrowed her eyes. “Lord Sharma will open the way for you. I will remain behind to stand guard. However, my brother has asked to be considered for a place on your squad. He is a scout.”

“Kazmyn?” I asked curiously. “He was sitting beside Visha wasn’t he?”

“Yes. He is half-dwarven. Kazmyn is five and twenty and has led a sheltered life. He has read too many tall tales of heroic highbloods, and now he craves their company—and adventure.” She looked annoyed again.

I could see Blake trying not to laugh. “Who exactly selects this squad?” I asked. If she said the dwarves, then I knew this might get ugly.

“You will select a leader from among you. The leader will choose who is to go.”

“Obviously you’re the leader,” Blake said, looking at me.

“Me?” I squawked.

“You’re my rider. And you’re leadership material, Pendragon.” He grinned. “I saw that the moment I met you.”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring the jest. Zaira was looking at us in confusion. “Well, Elaria’s just going to love this.”

“Elaria Avari and the other regents are not to be told about any of this,” Zaira said sharply. “Dinesh and I will open the path only for those who you have approved.”

“Because if the other highbloods hear the word *treasure* or, worse, find out there’s a clutch of eggs,” Blake supplied, “there’d be chaos.”

Zaira nodded. “You will face enough dangers below without also having to contend with another team of highbloods at your throat.”

“Wonderful,” I muttered.

“When do we leave?” Blake asked directly.

“You have one day and one night. We will leave the morning after.”

“One day?” I exclaimed. “One day to prepare?” I hoped my surprise seemed genuine enough. The truth was, we’d already started packing.

She nodded. “There is another reason we cannot delay.” My skin prickled. Zaira’s gaze moved between us. “You have been dealing with a plague.”

“Yes,” I said. “It only affects highbloods, and we’re between waves at the moment.”

“As the Veil cracks, evil seeps in—even below the stones. Do you remember your history?”

Blake was quicker than I. “The Cataclysm,” he said.

Zaira nodded. “When the realms bled together, malevolent beings swarmed Sangratha.”

“That was when the dragons came,” Blake said.

Zaira shrugged. “Perhaps.”

“Fuck. Can’t trust anything you learn in school, can you?” Blake shook his head.

“Does that mean this isn’t the first time someone has tried to bring the Veil down?” I demanded.

She gave a wry smile. “Of course not. The longer we delay, the more we risk facing greater evils.”

“Sounds fun,” Blake drawled. He glanced at me, and I knew what he was thinking: Nyxaris had been right.

“How does Viktor play into all of this?” I asked quickly.

“Do you understand the geography of the dwarven kingdom?” Zaira replied.

I shook my head.

“We don’t learn much about dwarves up here,” Blake quipped.

“I wish we did, though,” I said. “Your world sounds fascinating.”

“It is *one* world which we all must share,” Zaira grumbled. “But yes, dwarven history is fascinating. Our geography is different from yours. Long ago, a road was built, leading toward a concealed vault. That is where the eggs lie safeguarded. When we journey below, we will open this road.”

“And there’s only one road leading to this vault?” Blake asked.

Zaira hesitated. “There is another entrance, long kept a secret. But we have reason to believe those working to tear down the Veil have learned of it.”

“So, we’re not going to be the only ones down there hunting for these eggs,” I surmised.

She shook her head. “No. There are two paths. They will be coming, but from the other direction.”

“Marcus,” Blake breathed. His eyes had lit up with an eagerness that scared me.

“So it’s a race, then? Which path is closer?” I demanded.

“The other,” she admitted. “But you will have … advantages.”

I frowned. “Will we? How are we getting there? Or better yet, how did you all get here? I didn’t think there were any entrances to dwarven cities

near Veilmar.”

Zaira smirked. “We came from beneath your feet.”

“Well, yes, we figured that out.” Blake narrowed his eyes. “Oh. You mean right below?”

She nodded. “There is an entrance below the school.”

“But I’ve been down there. The city is a ruin …” Blake trailed off.

Zaira was looking superior again. “The dwarves’ ways are ours and ours alone. You see only what we permit you to see.”

“I thought Orphos were the masters of dreams and illusions,” Blake remarked.

“The dwarves are greatly skilled in many things” was all Zaira would say.

“Two creatures,” I said suddenly. “You said only two creatures can access the place where the eggs are hidden.”

“That’s right,” Zaira said reluctantly.

“And the other, another dragon?” Blake guessed. “You mean, Molindra or Viktor?”

Zaira hesitated. “Not … exactly.”

“When you said we’d have an advantage …” Then, “Oh, fuck,” Blake said. “Absolutely not.”

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CHAPTER 39

REGAN



I was held fast in the fangs of a nightmare. My body may have been in the Avari tower, but my mind was trapped back in that room of bright lights and clean white stone.

My eyes were closed, but I could sense the brightness. The lights burned overhead as cruel hands held me down. I knew what would come next, and I couldn't stop it. I'd feel the blade cutting into my skin, feel the blood welling. Or, worse, I'd feel weight, breath, skin. A body that didn't belong on top of mine.

Tears spilled from my eyes. "No," I tried to say. But my voice wouldn't work. I tried to fight, but my limbs were tied. I made a sound—raw, animal panic tearing from my throat. The nightmare shifted. Flames rose around me. There! I had Florence by the wrist. I was pulling her forward. I could see the broken windows. We only needed to get through the flames, and then …

The heat was too much. The flames touched my skin. I screamed and reached for Florence's wrist … but she was gone.

I cried out in fury and frustration.

The dream shifted. Cold air hit my face. Then, the scent of snow. *I ran low to the ground, my muscles coiling, tasting pine and frost. My paws hit the white powder, and it rose around me in soft bursts. Above me the sky was wide and huge. I was a wolf. I was free. I ran with a pack. It was not my pack, somehow I knew this, yet they accepted me. I would always be welcome with the wolves. Some bodies were dark and others were pale, but we moved with a fluid oneness despite the differences between us.*

From the corner of my eyes, I saw the wolves' breath steaming, shoulders rolling powerfully beneath thick fur. Joy flowed through me like a river

current at the rightness of it all. There was no pain, no doubt, no fear, only the motion of my legs as I churned through the clean snow, the cold kissing my muzzle and the wind streaming past my flattened ears. I ran harder, leaping over a drift and landing smoothly.

The snow blurred. The world shifted. The dream broke.

I woke up with a gasp. For a second, I didn't know where I was. Then I felt the sheets beneath my hands and heard the hush of waves. The curtains hanging from the windows were stirring a little in the breeze. I felt dizzy from the nightmare—and the dream. One clung to my skin like a foul sweat. The other had left my heart so full of hope that waking was another kind of pain.

I sat up, putting a hand to my chest, trying to calm my racing heart. My gaze moved to the door, and I saw him. Lying at the threshold, body pressed up against the closed door, gray and silver with thick fur and a tail the size of my arm. Even asleep, the wolf looked as if it could tear the world apart if it chose. My throat tightened. The dream had been so real. My chest ached for my pack. And always, there had been one shape running just out of reach. Always keeping pace with me but off to one side.

I cleared my throat. "Kage."

The wolf's ears twitched.

"Kage," I said more loudly.

The wolf's head lifted. Large brown eyes, intelligent and aware, looked back at me. The wolf watched me for a heartbeat, then rose. In the space of a moment, he was no longer a wolf.

I'd seen it before. But each time it happened so quickly, it was almost impossible to describe. Bones shifted. Fur became skin. The huge frame both stretched and compacted. Then Kage Tanaka stood there, barefoot, his hair still ruffled from sleep, his chest bare. Not just his chest. I cleared my throat again meaningfully. His eyes widened, and he looked down, a sheepish expression on his face. I felt my own face heating up. Like we'd both been caught doing something—not indecent but intimate.

Kage grabbed a pair of trousers that lay folded beside him on the floor and started tugging them on. I looked away, my face still hot, staring out the window, waiting, looking at the clouds moving across the sky. But my pulse wouldn't seem to settle. Not from fear but from this strange, stupid pull. Like my body wanted to lean toward him without my mind's permission.

"Regan."

I looked back. He had the trousers on, and his expression was composed, no hint of embarrassment now. I studied him briefly. He'd always been a commanding man. Now, even with his hair falling into his eyes, his jaw was set. I took in the lines of his strong body, the hard planes of his chest. His long legs tense with a wolfish readiness. His squared shoulders. Only his eyes were soft. They didn't match the rest of him or what I'd seen him do.

I hated how the room suddenly felt smaller, even though he hadn't taken a single step toward me. I reminded myself that I was angry. "How long have you been lying there?" I demanded, gesturing at the door.

"Since you started screaming in your sleep."

I licked my lips. "I wasn't screaming."

"You were. I'm sorry, usually I stay on the other side." His voice was steady, but I saw the tenseness in his jaw. Like he was holding back, restraining something.

"Why stay at all?"

"Because you're still afraid. You're back at Bloodwing, and you're safe in my tower. Lysander and I have warded the room and the ways in and out, but you're still afraid. And so, I stand there and make sure no one comes through that door." He didn't move closer, didn't argue. But he also didn't leave. His jaw was clenched tighter now, like the idea of leaving the room now physically hurt.

I thought of my last encounter with Lysander. I searched for some grace. "Look, it's not that I'm not grateful. You and Lysander risked your lives for me." The words felt like dust in my mouth. "You could have been killed. You didn't have to come for me."

He'd been looking down. Now his head lifted quickly. "Yes, we did have to."

I shook my head. "You and Lysander both have a misguided sense of responsibility. I'm not even in your house. You don't owe me anything. Certainly not dreams." Suddenly, I felt angry again. "You invaded me."

"I wouldn't reject the gift of peace so quickly." Kage's gaze had sharpened, wolf-fast.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Lysander is the only reason you slept at all."

I wanted to argue that there was another reason: The fluffin helped me, too. But maybe Kage was right. Maybe I really had been screaming. I suddenly wondered how long and how loud. Had he waited until there were

students gathered out in the hall listening before he'd finally made the decision to come in?

I took a breath. "I thought Lysander said I was hard to reach."

Kage smiled slightly. "I think you're easier to get through to now. Part of the problem was proximity. And—"

"Viktor," I supplied.

"Lysander is talented. But it goes beyond that." His gaze went to my throat, and I flinched. He quickly looked away.

"Look, honestly, I don't care. I don't want him in my head—or you." My throat tightened. "I just need to be alone. I don't understand what this is all about, but you and Lysander can stop now. You don't need to take turns babysitting the broken girl." The words were harsh. But what did they want from me? What did they think I could really give? I had nothing left.

"Is this about …" I cleared my throat, trying to find the words to ask the awkward question. "Look, Viktor wanted me because he thought he could use me against you. When I didn't die after I broke the vow we made, I think he got the wrong idea."

Kage narrowed his eyes. "Did he, now?"

I nodded. "He seemed to think …" I felt my cheeks heat up again. "He thought you and I were bonded somehow. I tried to tell him that was impossible, that I'd never agreed to that. All we did was make the Blood Vow." Kage looked back at me, saying nothing. "It *is* impossible, right?" I asked, feeling frustrated. "We're not … mates."

"Viktor didn't need you to know the truth. He only needed to be able to use you."

I looked at him in disbelief. "A riddle? Are you seriously going to speak to me in riddles right now?"

He didn't answer.

"Give me a straight answer," I demanded. "And stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?" Kage's face was as innocent as his wolf's.

"So, we're not mates?" I asked emphatically.

He looked at me. "When are you going to stop pretending you don't feel it?"

My face went hot. Anger blazed. "I don't feel anything for you. And I don't want to ever again."

Kage’s eyes softened in a way that seemed meant to disarm. I suddenly wanted to throw something at him. “Then, there’s no problem, is there?”

I sucked in a breath, my hands tangling in the sheets. “Get out,” I said again, but weaker this time. “Please.”

For a moment he looked like an animal being told to chew off its own arm. Then he nodded. And then he was gone. That had been too easy. And also not easy at all.

I tried to run my fingers through my hair. But the tangles got in my way. My hair felt greasy. I sniffed myself, then wrinkled my nose; my hair was filthy, I reeked of old sweat. When was the last time I’d bathed? I tried to remember and failed.

Oh, Bloodmaiden. And he had a wolf’s sense of smell. I stank, but he had stayed anyway.

Shrinking in shame, I pushed myself out of bed, trying to remember what standing felt like—ironic considering how fast I’d just been running a few minutes ago in the dream. When had I last gotten out of bed? When had I done more than walk across the room?

I might not want company, but this had gone on long enough, I decided. A small part of me, I realized, still had a sense of pride.

There was a trunk at the end of my bed, and on top was a folded soft white robe. I grabbed it and moved toward the door to the bathing chamber. The handle was silver, cool to the touch. Inside, a beautiful white marble bathing pool had been cut straight into the floor. Narrow shelves along the wall held glass bottles filled with scented oils and lotions. There was a large wicker basket filled with fresh, folded towels at the edge of the pool.

I ran the bath hot, then stepped in, being very careful not to let myself look at myself in the full-length mirror that covered one entire wall. Bathing was one thing, looking another.

I felt my way over to a low bench built into the side of the tub and sank down onto it until the water covered my shoulders. Then I sat there for what felt like hours, letting the warmth loosen my muscles, eyes closed, remembering the dream of the wolves. Eventually I sluiced myself with soap and scrubbed off as the water began to cool. I washed my hair twice. Then I added more hot water and stayed until my fingers had wrinkled and the heat was fading a second time.

When I finally left the tub, I felt different. If not better, at least clean.

My room was no longer empty. The fluffin was back, sleeping at the foot of my bed. I walked over slowly, towels over my hair and my body, and rubbed the space between his ears. He didn't wake up, but he started to purr. The sound filled me with a warm feeling, like sunlight on bare skin. Something changed in me when I was around this little creature. Something like what I felt when I'd run with the wolves in my dream. The memories didn't disappear—not exactly. But they lightened, like a window cracked open in a dark room. I could think of more than just the memories now. I could dwell on something besides the pain.

I toweled my hair and braided it back, then crossed over to the wardrobe. The doors were carved with white and silver flowers, crescent moons and stars. Inside, the contents had been carefully curated. Some of my Drakharrow clothes were there—dark reds and heavy blacks. I touched a sleeve, wondering who had brought them. Who had thought to do all this? There was a multitude of colors in the wardrobe. To one side, Avari silvers hung alongside tunics and dresses of pure white. At the other end of the wardrobe, Orphos golds and purples greeted me. I saw First Year blues and even a few greens. I hesitated. Why give me so many choices?

My hand hovered over a red dress, old and familiar. This is who I was. But I wasn't Viktor's. Not anymore. And I certainly wasn't Blake's.

My father's loyalties lay with House Drakharrow. And my father had let them take Persis away. He'd done nothing to rise up against Viktor. He'd given both of his children to a monster.

My eyes landed on a dress in a softer shade. A pale lilac, the skirt long and flowing. I'd always liked purple, as it matched my eyes. My mother had never let me wear it. When I'd come to Bloodwing, I'd sometimes worn it as a small act of rebellion. I'd gotten away with it back then, but once Viktor had selected me as his consort, he'd put a stop to it.

I pulled the dress from its hanger and pulled it on. The soft fabric slid over my skin easily, falling to midcalf and covering my burns. The sleeves were long and fitted, but the neckline wasn't as high as I was used to. I touched my neck, feeling the scar. I reached for a white scarf and carefully wrapped it around my throat, still avoiding the mirrors. I was just pulling on a pair of tall tan leather boots when there was a knock at the door. My first instinct was to ignore it. Or snap in customary irritation.

I paused. It was late afternoon. Kage wouldn't have returned, not after I'd sent him away. The healers had stopped coming, leaving ointments and

dressings for me to apply myself instead. Could it be Lysander? I thought of the dreams. A *gift* Kage had called them.

I drew a breath. “Who is it?”

“It’s Medra.”

My fingers stilled on a buckle. I finished with the boots, crossed the room, and opened the door. I tried to think of when I’d seen Medra Pendragon last—the night of the attack on Veilmar. We’d both been in the Avari tower. Then I’d left with Kage. We clashed with Viktor. I’d been taken. I realized I’d had no idea what Medra had been doing all this time. I hadn’t even asked if she was still alive.

“It’s really good to see you.” The words jerked out of my throat.

Medra’s green eyes widened. She was about my height, but with a more athletic build. Her curly red hair was pulled back from her face, showing her pointed rider’s ears. She wore Drakharrow colors—a soft dark crimson sweater over a short, pleated black skirt with high black lace-up boots. Freckles covered her face and collarbone, bright against her ivory skin. I’d thought she was ugly when I’d first seen her, but I’d been lying to myself. So, she wasn’t perfect, but I had to admit she had her good points.

I think what I’d hated most about her was how confident she’d looked. So sure of herself, even when surrounded by the most powerful people in the realm. She’d looked like she’d had every right to be on Blake’s arm—that was probably what I’d hated the most. He was hers now. But the thought didn’t cause me any pain.

Her lips twitched. “Careful, Regan, or word will get around about you. Wouldn’t want to let the secret out.”

My eyes widened. “What do you mean? What secret?”

“That secretly you have a heart of gold.” Her mouth split into a grin as I flushed. “We wouldn’t want to destroy your mean-girl reputation, would we?”

I grimaced. “No, wouldn’t want that.”

Her face turned serious. “May I come in?”

I held the door open. “Be my guest.”

She gave me a look that said she saw more of what I was hiding than I wanted her to, then stepped in. Her gaze moved to the bed where the fluffin was still sleeping, nose tucked under his tail. “I see Neville’s made himself at home here.”

I felt suddenly self-conscious. “He’s been coming around on his own. I don’t know why. Maybe he misses her. He’s very … persistent.” I suddenly realized what I’d said. I was back. Her friend was not.

But Medra didn’t look put off. “Neville picks his targets carefully.”

“If I’m his target, I must be the most pathetic one he’s ever chosen.” My cheeks warmed. Why had I said that?

Her expression softened. “I think Neville is wiser than you give him credit for. He knows where he’s needed the most.”

I sat down in a chair by the hearth, the lilac dress pooling around my knees. I touched a hand self-consciously to the white scarf around my neck, making sure it was in place, as Medra took the chair opposite me. For a few moments, we sat in silence.

“How are you?” she asked finally. She grimaced. “Sorry. I know no one ever wants to answer that question.”

“It’s all right. Honestly, I don’t know,” I said slowly. “I was thinking of going out today.”

“Have you … not been going out?”

I shook my head.

“I know a little of what happened. But not much.”

My stomach tightened. I didn’t want to be known. I didn’t want anyone knowing the details of what had happened to me. The sordid things Viktor had done. The ways the others had hurt me.

“But I know I have yet another reason to want to tear Viktor apart with my bare hands,” she went on.

I stared at her. Trying to wrap my head around the idea that Medra Pendragon felt protective of me.

“No one is saying anything bad about you, Regan,” Medra said softly. “We’re just glad you’re back. Everyone thinks you’re very brave. Kage told us about Veilmar.”

I forced myself to meet her eyes. This girl’s arrival shook my world. I’d treated her like garbage. I’d been petty and cruel. I remembered the Consort Games, standing back to back with her, fighting to survive. She’d helped me then, even after all I’d done. It felt like it was another lifetime ago. “I’m surprised you want to talk to me at all, after all I’ve done,” I said bluntly.

“I didn’t come here to fight,” she said immediately. “I hope you know that.”

I raised a hand. “I know. And I know this is far too late, but … I want to say I’m sorry. For everything.” I took a deep breath. “I wish I’d been different that first day we’d met. I wish … I wish I hadn’t just pretended to be kind.”

We looked at one another for a long moment. Then Medra nodded. “Thank you. I have never wanted to be your enemy, you know.”

“I think I’ve known that for a while now.”

She leaned forward. “Look, there are things happening—big things. I know Kage and Lysander are trying to protect you, but I think you deserve to know what’s been going on.”

My heart beat faster. “What do you mean?”

“Has anyone told you about the delegation from Thrazdummar?”

When I shook my head, she quickly filled me in on the dwarves, the meeting at the Sanctum, and much more. When she was finished, my throat was tight. “And Florence? How does she fit into all this?”

Medra’s face quickly masked. “We’re working on that. We’re not giving up on her.”

That was probably the answer I deserved. Still, I couldn’t help adding, “I tried to help her. I didn’t want to leave her behind.”

“I know.” Medra smiled briefly, sadly. “Kage and Lysander told us.”

“So why are you telling me all of this? What do you need me to do?”

She pulled out an envelope. Thick, expensive paper sealed with a black crescent moon. House Avari. She flipped it over, showing me where my name had been written in an elegant hand. “This came to the Drakharrow Tower for you.”

Obviously it wasn’t a letter from Kage. I took it and broke the seal; the letter was from Elaria. It started with praises and flattery, then the letter moved into a list of concerns—for order, for stability, for the restoration of highblood traditions. One line jumped out at me. *It is absolutely essential you step back into your role as headmistress of Bloodwing Academy.* I read the words twice, then skimmed the rest, catching phrases like *restoring the proper hierarchy* and *protecting Bloodwing from the corruption of rebellious blightborn influence*. When I finished, my skin was crawling. I folded the parchment back up. “Elaria. She wants …” I looked at Medra. “You already know what she wants.”

She nodded. “I didn’t read it, but I can guess what it says. Elaria wants you to be their weapon again.”

I thought of that first day, standing on the balcony beside Viktor with the blightborn woman in between us. “Elaria wants the old me. The one who could smile while she did horrible things in the name of tradition. But I can’t go back to being that. Some of that was really me, but I hope you know some of those things, I did … well, I did them because Viktor …” My throat felt choked.

“I know,” Medra said quickly. “We know, Regan.”

“That’s not who I want to be anymore.” I hesitated. “Do you think it’s too late?”

Something moved across Medra’s face. “I can’t imagine what you’ve been through. What you’ve already suffered.”

I wasn’t going to let her do that. “No. It’s not just about what I’ve suffered. I made people suffer, too. You know what I was like.”

“I know what you were like. But do I think it’s too late to be different? No, absolutely not. We can always change our fate.” She was quiet for a moment. “I have to believe that. But that girl you were? That’s who we need right now, Regan. We need who you used to be.”

I looked at the letter in my hands. “You want me to go back to being a bigot? A bully?” My throat felt dry. “Worse, a highblood pawn?”

“Not a pawn. We want you to be a tool. A tool of the rebellion.”

A trickle of hope ran into my heart. *“Rebellion?”*

“You weren’t there when House Mortis barred the doors of Bloodwing the night of the Veilmar attack,” Medra said quietly. “That night changed everything.”

She told me then how Avari, Drakharrow, and Orphos had opened their doors to students from House Mortis and evicted any students who harbored similar beliefs to Silvio Santos and his ilk.

“So you’re saying Quinn and Larissa and Gretchen …”

“All of those bitches are in Mortis now,” Medra said bluntly. “Will you miss them?”

Our eyes met. I smiled. “No. I won’t.”

She grinned. “Didn’t think so.”

I cleared my throat. “What about me? Where do I fit in?”

“You mean, are you still in Drakharrow?” Medra looked surprised. “You are if you want to be. You’ve been staying in the Avari tower all this time, so I guess Blake and I thought …”

My eyes widened. “I’m not an Avari.”

She laughed. “You can be whatever you want to be, Regan.”

“If my father heard you say that, his head would explode.” I chewed my lip, hesitating. Then, “Viktor has my little brother, Persis.” I told her all I knew. To my surprise she nodded her head when I finished.

“Kage and Lysander have been trying to get word on Persis. Didn’t they tell you all that already?”

I shook my head. “I … haven’t really spoken to them much.”

“I see.” Her voice was gentle. “Well, I’ll try to find more information. But the Black Keep is where Viktor seems to have kept most of his records. And now it’s under Elaria’s control.”

I nodded.

“Look, you know how to play them, Regan, so maybe you can find something out we weren’t able to. You know how to work Elaria. You know the highblood language. Their rules, their rituals.”

“Their prejudices and their ruthlessness,” I said quietly.

She nodded, then smiled sneakily. “But now you’re the worst possible thing you could be—a double agent. A highblood with empathy. There’s nothing that scares them more than a highblood with a heart.”

I looked down at the letter. “You want me to pretend—”

“I want Bloodwing to survive while we’re gone,” she corrected.

“Gone where?” My head jerked up.

“With the dwarves. We’re leaving soon, so I need your answer.” She told me then what she’d left out before.

When she was through, my hands clutched the arms of my chair tightly. I felt sick. “If Viktor gets more dragons …”

“That’s what we need to prevent, but we can’t leave the school unprotected. Now that Elaria’s forcing Rodriguez to step down, we need someone here we can trust.”

Before I could stop myself, the question tore out of me. “Will Kage and Lysander be leaving, too?” There was quiet. “Of course, they must be.”

“No.” Medra was shaking her head. “They’re both House Leaders, so they won’t leave Bloodwing. They want to protect the students under their care. And … I think they want to stay with you,” she said carefully. “To support you. They seem to consider your recovery their own personal cause.”

I felt heat spread up my neck and lifted a hand to the white scarf. “Oh.” Of course they wouldn’t want to leave the school. And of course everyone

must think I'd need a lot of support as headmistress. I nodded.

"Does that mean you'll do it?"

My expression turned wry. "I'm surprised you all think you can trust me. That you don't think I'll just become drunk with power."

To my surprise, Medra laughed. A real laugh. I found myself laughing with her. "Oh, Regan." She gasped, after a moment. "Don't even joke about that. If you knew what Visha said before I—" She must have seen my face. "I'm sorry. She said you'd always been wonderful at lying and so the role would suit you perfectly."

I made a face. "Sadly, she's right about that."

"Yes," Medra agreed. "But now you're going to use that skill for something good."

I felt a strange ache in my chest. "Visha and I were friends once. Maybe one day I'll win her over again."

Medra smiled. "I'd like to see that. She's one of the good ones. You know, in a lot of ways, you two have a lot in common." She stood up.

"So when do I start?" I asked awkwardly, rising to my feet. "Should I pretend to throw Rodriguez out of his office tomorrow?"

She looked thoughtful. "That might not be a bad idea."

I groaned. "All right." I looked at her. "When exactly do you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning. The dwarves have made us form a squad."

I perked up. "A squad? Really?" I realized Medra's eyes were no longer on me. Instead she was looking over at the fluffin resting on my bed. Neville lay curled up, his nose tucked under his tail. Every now and then, his ears would twitch at a sound only he could hear.

Medra's gaze lingered on the little creature. "He's amazing, isn't he? Such a smart, stubborn little creature."

"I think he's been helping me." I hesitated. "I think he's doing something to me."

"What do you mean?"

"When he's here, I breathe easier. The memories don't hold me hostage as badly." Secretly, I wanted to tell her what I suspected—that the fluffin wasn't just an animal at all. That he was, well, magical. Like a creature from a children's tale. "I still have nightmares, but not when he's here. And the memories … it's like he's doing something to them. Every day, they're blurrier. Less intense. It's like he's helping me find my way back to myself." I colored. "Is that strange?"

She shook her head. “Not at all. He saved Florence’s life, you know.”

My eyes widened. “I … didn’t know that.”

She nodded. “It’s like he can sense when we’re hurt the worst and then plants himself there and refuses to budge.” Then I saw her shoulders tighten. “Look, Regan—”

“It’s about Neville, isn’t it?” I looked at her. “He’s going with you.”

She hesitated. “We can’t exactly ask him. He goes where he’s needed … and that’s kind of the point. But I think so, yes. We need his help. Desperately.”

I looked at the fluffin. So still, so soft. “And you’re leaving in the morning.”

“No one is going to take him if he doesn’t want to go,” she promised. “But …”

“He was Blake’s to begin with.” There was a lump in my throat. It was like Persis all over again: Another person I cared about was being taken away. But I knew that wasn’t fair. This was different.

Medra was shaking her head. “He’s not Blake’s. I don’t think he really belongs to any of us.”

“He’s a gift,” I said, thinking of the dreams Lysander had sent and the way the fluffin made me feel. I stood up and crossed over to the bed. The little creature lifted his head, looked up at me with sleepy eyes, and gave a huge yawn.

“Whatever he is, he might be the difference between whether we fail or succeed,” Medra said softly from behind me. I nodded. “You know, you won’t be alone, Regan. Kage is still right outside your door.”

I looked at her sharply. “He is?”

She nodded. “I’ve heard he or Lysander are there every hour of every day. One of them has stood watch ever since they brought you back.”

“I don’t know why. I never asked them to do that. I don’t know why they came for me at all.”

“You said you’ve been talking to Neville.” She hesitated. “Maybe it’s time you talked to them?”

Neville’s eyes had closed again. I watched the rise and fall of his breathing. Tomorrow the foot of my bed would be empty. Tomorrow I’d be walking around Bloodwing with the title of *headmistress* weighing on my shoulders like a heavy chain. I thought of the wolf at my door—and then,

before I could help myself I imagined the wolf lying next to me in the bed. The image was oddly comforting.

I turned to Medra. “I wish you the best of luck. If anyone can do this, you can.”

“I know you don’t want to put that mask on again,” Medra said, getting to her feet, “but it is a mask, Regan. We all know that.”

I tossed my braid over my shoulder as haughtily as I could manage. “Make me your ice queen again. I’ll play the part. I was rather good at it once, wasn’t I?”

“You were.” She smiled. “You’re going to be … incredible.”

I snorted. “Believe me. If I am, it’ll be purely to spite the ones talking about me behind my back.” I looked at her, my face a mix of admiration and confusion. “You’ve always been so brave. I’ll admit I’ve never understood how you did it.”

Her cheeks flushed. “Have I? I think I’m just stubborn. I hate seeing something wrong and not being able to fix it.” She reached out a hand and touched my arm gently. “Look, I know we’re not best friends or anything, but I really am glad you’re back. We need you. I know we can count on you.”

They needed *me*? I felt dizzy. To think I’d thought a walk was all I was up for today. “You make it sound very inspiring.”

She laughed. “Well, I’m not good at speeches. But it’s easy to say when it’s true. You’re doing something very brave. And you’re doing it without the promise of a reward, without any applause. With nothing to gain.” She started moving to the door. As she reached the threshold, Neville cracked one eye open, looked back and forth between us both, gave a tiny huff, then closed his eyes again. “See?” Medra whispered, smiling. “Small but stubborn.”

“Like you,” I pointed out.

“Like you, too,” she countered. Her grin flashed again, and then she was gone.

I sat down on the bed, then curled myself around the sleeping fluffin. If Medra was right, he’d be gone tomorrow. I’d miss him, but for the first time since I’d come back, the thought of a new day didn’t feel like a death sentence. It felt like a beginning.

Because Medra had been wrong about one thing: I wasn’t doing this for nothing. No, there wouldn’t be a reward. But perhaps there might be

redemption.

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CHAPTER 40

MEDRA



Blake’s room wasn’t quite the same these days. He’d always been neat and tidy; he and Florence were the same in that way. Now signs of my presence were everywhere—a folded sweater tossed over the back of a chair, my boots near the door where I’d kicked them off in a hurry. A few hair ties on the mantel. As for the bathroom … well, let’s just say the counter wasn’t looking as uncluttered as usual. The room itself was a mix of both our scents. I could only ever smell Blake’s. Something fresh like mint leaves mixed with the sweet tang of green apple. He thought I was crazy when I told him that. But then, he thought I smelled like autumn. Whatever the case, we weren’t pretending. Not anymore. This space was ours, and we were shaping it into our home. Though we wouldn’t be in it much longer.

Sometimes, in between the chaos, I tried to imagine a different kind of space we might share some day. But the problem was there was just too much going on to think that far ahead. To think of a real future at all. One where we’d both still be alive.

I sat curled in the armchair with my knees pulled up to my chest. In one hand, I held a letter. In the other, a picture. The picture was a family portrait. A beautiful fae woman stood in the center, her long silver hair falling in a wave over her shoulders. Her eyes were golden and opalescent. She looked hardly older than I was—I knew that was partly her fae blood. But she was also the youngest of Orcades’s sisters. Half-human, half-fae. She was my aunt, Morgan Pendragon. Beside Morgan stood a tall fae man with rich bronze skin and intense green eyes. His hair was dark and the ends curled. Small gleaming black horns stood out from his forehead. This was my uncle, Draven. They weren’t the only ones in the picture, their arms were full. Morgan held a little boy, maybe two or so. He had silver hair like

hers and green eyes like Draven's. His cheeks were still round with that toddler softness. My uncle held a little girl who looked the same age; the children must have been twins. The little girl had tiny horns peeking out from her forehead, half-covered by a tumble of bright curly violet hair. She was grinning mischievously and looked so lifelike, so real, that I half expected her to reach out and grab my finger. Then there was Kaye, Morgan's younger brother. My uncle stood on Morgan's other side, looking a little out of place. He smiled shyly, a lock of brown hair flopping down and almost covering his hazel eyes.

My throat tightened so hard it hurt. They were alive. All of them.

The last time I'd seen Morgan and Draven, I'd been lying on an altar in a grove of oak trees. I'd left the world that day, not knowing if they had lived or died.

I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. I looked over at Hawl; the Ursidaur sat stiffly on Blake's sofa. The couch was large, but right now it looked like it had been made for someone half Hawl's size. The bear's massive body took up most of the cushions. A huge dwarven ax leaned against the sofa beside them, evidently a present from their new friends in Thrazdummar. The bear watched me; it was hard to know what they were thinking.

"These are their children?" I asked.

The bear nodded slowly. "Twins. A boy and a girl. Caspian and Viviane."

"So that's why they couldn't come themselves." I hadn't meant to say it. I hadn't meant the words to sound so accusing. But there it was: Morgan and Draven weren't here. They hadn't come. They had sent Hawl instead.

"They wished to come. Read the letter, little cub." Hawl's deep voice was rumbling yet gentle.

I nodded, and sliding the portrait under the sheaf of papers, I started to read.

Dearest Medra,

It is the strangest thing to be writing this. To know that there is a chance you may hold these pages in your hands someday not too far off. What will your face be like as you read? What will you be thinking? My darling girl, we have missed you. We love you.

I started to sob. The words were so simple. But I had needed to hear them so, so very badly.

We want to be there with you right now. Will you believe me when I promise you that? I swear it. You will have the portrait we sent. Did you know that Crescent was such an impressive artist? He sends his love and asks your forgiveness—you may know for what better than I, but he insists I include mention of it. Truly, though, we all ask for your forgiveness, Medra. We had no idea you survived. We have been mourning you for what feels like such a very long time. Your absence has been unbearably painful.

Tears rolled down my face. On the couch, Hawl was holding themself impressively still.

When we learned you were alive, we were overjoyed. But then that joy quickly muddled into something else—fear and shame as we learned you had been cast into a new world, one full of dangers. You were all alone. You had saved us, but now we could not save you. We have felt so helpless. For months, we have searched for a way to reach you. And yet you of all people will know how great the divide that separates us.

I nodded my head even though I knew Morgan couldn't see me. She was here. Right now. In this room. Talking to me. That was how it felt.

Draven was desperate. Reckless. I want you to know that. He will add his own additions to this letter, but I've made him let me write first. He is a whirlwind of emotions when it comes to you, Medra. You were in many ways, and all the ones that count, our very first child. Orcades gave birth to you. My brother was your sire. But Draven very much thinks of himself as your true father. His love for you knows no bounds.

My heart clenched. I had always thought of him that way, too.

And as for me, Medra, I am your aunt, but I feel for you like a mother, an aunt, and a sister all mixed together. Whatever we are to one another, the love I have for you goes beyond worlds. Beyond lifetimes.

I turned the page.

You will see the children in the picture. Viviane and Caspian are their names. They came along at a time when we couldn't have needed them more. They are your cousins. But when you look at them, you probably see a reason we are not there with you. I want you to know that is not the case, Medra. It was not the children who kept us away. Or at least, not them alone.

I glanced at Hawl. "She says it wasn't the children who made them stay in Pendrath."

The bear nodded. "Keep reading, little cub."

I turned back to the letter.

Orcades's visit was brief. And yet, she has such a way with words, wouldn't you agree? Thus, she managed to say a great deal and leave quite an impact despite the brevity of her visit.

I snorted. That was my mother, all right.

She told us of your situation. No, that isn't right. First she told us of how she had saved you, Medra. Of how she had somehow stopped you from dying—which feels like such a strange thing to even write—and managed to plant you in another world entirely. Whatever there is to say about your mother and whatever questionable things she did in her past, I must give credit where credit is due: she saved you, and that is a miracle that Draven and I will never be able to repay her for.

I supposed it was rather miraculous. I wondered if they knew about the dragon.

Now, was your uncle a tad appalled when he found out that Orcades had deposited you in a world run by bloodsucking creatures? Yes, I won't bother to deny it—and I'm sure Hawl and Lancelet will tell you more.

I looked up abruptly. "Lancelet? Lancelet is supposed to be here? Where is she?"

Hawl growled softly. "Finish the letter, and then you and I will speak."

"But Lancelet." I stared at the bear. "Is she … ?" Hawl shook their head. "All right," I muttered. "Fine. Gods." I flicked my eyes back to the page.

Your uncle is looking over my shoulder, and he wishes me to tell you that he knows Odessa trained you well, and he's sure you've no doubt skewered, in his words, many of those bloodsucking monstrosities by the time you read this letter. Again, his words, not mine.

I grimaced. If only he knew.

Now, Orcades told us a little more about your situation. She mentioned a man named Blake

I flushed and glanced quickly at Hawl. But the bear had apparently grown bored sitting so still and was now polishing their ax. Biting my lip, I went back to reading.

who abducted you and how you were forced into a betrothal with him. She also made sure to mention that he was a blood-drinking vampire. However, reading between the lines—something your uncle at times has trouble doing—I could see that your mother was fond of Blake. In fact, I believe she may even have used the word charming. Did you know, dear Medra, that when I first met your uncle, I wanted nothing more than to murder him in any number of terrible ways? This feeling, of course, did not last.

My eyes widened. “No, Morgan, I did not know that,” I muttered aloud.

Fascinating, is it not, how quickly our feelings may change. How hatred may move to light loathing and then light loathing to liking and from liking to desire and … Well, I’m sure you’ll get the idea. By the way, your uncle is looking over my shoulder again, and he demands I remove the word desire. But I will not. He is simply lucky I did not use a stronger word. Such as, perhaps, love? Oh, Medra. If you are indeed betrothed to this vampire man and if there is truly no way out, I do hope that the feelings you feel for him now have altered. I hope they may even be something like what I feel for your uncle.

“You have no idea,” I whispered softly.

And if they are not, if that is too much to hope for, if this man truly is a brute and if he has abused you or hurt you in any way, then please look over at Hawl. They are supposed to be with you as you read this letter, and Draven has, apparently, given them some rather explicit instructions.

I looked over at Hawl who was, of course, still polishing. “Hawl, what did Draven tell you to do to Blake?”

Hawl looked up with a mild expression. “Chop the evil blond man up into pieces so small he would fit into one of my stews.”

“He wanted you to eat him?” I squawked.

“I believe the eating part was optional. Perhaps I’d simply have fed him to his own family.”

“Gods,” I shuddered, trying not to picture Theo eating Blake Stew. “Forget I asked. Maybe I should’ve used my imagination.”

The bear lowered their head back to their ax.

Now, surely you are still asking yourself why your uncle and I are not there. Well, that takes us back to Orcades—apparently she is no longer with you. She claimed she was now inside of a dragon, if that can be believed. Considering my sister, I don’t doubt she is telling the truth. If only our father could see her now. I wonder if he’d be a little jealous.

I snorted. “Probably.” And no doubt he’d be best friends with Viktor. Or have killed him for us already.

Despite the children, do you know what the first thing your uncle did after hearing Orcades’s message was? He tried to get to you through the same portal she had spoken to me through.

I thought of the silver portal arches that could be found across Aercanum and wondered how exactly Orcades had managed to use one as a means of

communication. But then, my mother, as she would no doubt say herself, was a brilliant woman.

He found that impossible, however. The portal had completely burned out; whatever Orcades had done to communicate across worlds had broken the thing. We were traveling at the time and could not even use it to return to Camelot. I suppose that's what happens when you use an arch to speak with the dead. Of course, we weren't content to simply give up. When we got back to Camelot, we told everyone the news that you were alive and immediately began to search for a way to reach you. We were besieged by volunteers who wanted to be the first to try to come to you—by whatever means we could find. Fortunately, those means were within our grasp. Guinevere, the high priestess of Camelot, revealed to us a way to cross worlds through the creation of a new kind of portal that the temple had long kept a secret. She also possessed a list of worlds carefully guarded for countless generations.

I looked over at Hawl. "There are more than two worlds?"

"Oh, yes. More than two" was all the Bearkin said, as they kept polishing.

"Hmm." Back to the letter I went.

Draven wished to be the first to go; I would stay with the children. And then, the unexpected occurred. Along the southern border of Eskira—that was the name of the continent that the kingdom of Pendrath was on—there came word of a disturbance. Something had appeared along the southern border where there was once nothing. A mist stretching as far as the eye could see, reaching high to the heavens and down into the sea below.

"The Veil," I murmured.

Medra, it is weeks since the mist has appeared and the disturbance has now been called the greatest threat to Aercanum the world has ever seen. Pendrath is at war, not with our neighboring kingdoms but in support of them. Lyonesse is besieged. Across the Kasta Ocean, the Siabra lands do not fare better. The mist has formed a great wall along the southern edge of our world. Nothing may get past it. And yet things may get in.

"Things?" I burst out. "What things? Hawl, what *things* does she mean?"

The Bearkin looked up. "You're almost finished reading the letter. Finish the letter, little cub."

"Fine," I muttered for what felt like the hundredth time.

"I will tell you what you need to know, have no fear of that," they assured me.

I was on the last page, I suddenly realized.

Lancelet and Hawl will tell you more if they reach you—no, when they reach you, for I believe that they will. There are some who do not agree. Some believe that when

Lancelet and Hawl step through the portal we have built, they will pass not only through space but through time. Some scholars have warned us that they may wind up in a world that is not yours at all—or, worse, in a place where time runs differently. Where a minute there may be a year here in Aercanum, in which case, they will be lost. Possibly forever. I simply cannot believe this: I do not know why. There is no logic or rationality to my belief. But I feel in my heart that you will hold this letter one day soon and read my words. I wish I could hold you as you read, dear Medra. I wish your uncle could wrap you in his arms like he did when you were small and rock you back and forth.

Shit. I was crying again. I swiped at my face.

I refuse to believe we will not meet again in this lifetime. There are so many things we have yet to learn, so many new places to explore. For now, your uncle and I must face this threat. We must stay and protect our world—and our children. But we will never give up believing we will see you again. We will never give up hope. We love you. We hope you love us. Dear little Medra, what an incredible woman we know you have become. Be brave and stay strong.

All our love, Morgan and Draven

She'd said my uncle had wanted to add something. I flipped the page over and saw a few more lines written in a messy, masculine scrawl.

Medra, my beloved girl, will you really read these words? Are you happy? Or are you in torment? Your aunt believes your mother. She thinks this Blake may be your salvation as she was mine. I pray that it is so. But if it is not, stab him in the heart, little Medra, stab him in the heart, and twist the knife in hard. Hawl will be there to help clean up the blood. Never let anyone break your spirit or take from you what you do not wish to give. No man could ever deserve you. But should you truly love this man Blake, despite the loathsome affinity for blood that he possesses, I have no doubt he will be the most deserving man in the world. If not, there is the stew option.

All my love, Uncle Draven

"The stew." I shook my head. "Hawl, we are not making stew. Ever."

Hawl looked up. "No?'

"No!" I rolled my eyes. "Do I need to say the words aloud?"

"And what words may those be, little cub?" said the Bearkin, looking intentionally obtuse.

"I love Blake, Hawl." I took a deep breath. "Believe me, I didn't want to at first. I had no intention of doing so. But it happened. And he loves me. I know you and my uncle will find this hard to believe, but he treats me well. He's risked his life for me time and again."

"Yet he burned the city that lies just across that bridge," Hawl said, their voice a soft rumble.

“He did,” I admitted. “He will spend the rest of his life atoning for that night.”

“You would stand by him,” Hawl said, without accusation.

“Yes, I will stand by him. He’s broken, but so am I. Try to understand that. We’ve both been through a lot. Neither of us are perfect. But we’re trying.”

The bear nodded slowly. “I understand.”

I took a deep breath. “And if you are really here to help me and protect me, then you will stand by Blake, too. Can you do that?”

“If I must,” the Bearkin growled.

I smiled. “You must. You really must not make Blake into stew. Now, please tell me all the things my aunt’s letter left out. Starting with how you got here in the first place and where Lancelet is.”

“Crescent and the others built an arch that they believed could traverse worlds.”

“Well, you’re here,” I pointed out. “So it must have worked.”

“Yes and no.” The bear raised a paw to scratch their nose. “I arrived. Lancelet was just behind me.”

I gasped. “So, what? She’s dead?”

“I do not know for certain. I do not know if she stepped through. I passed through the portal. I stepped out into a dwarven city.”

I put my legs down and leaned forward excitedly. “You entered Sangratha, but underground? You found yourself in Thrazdummar?”

Hawl nodded. “As soon as I stepped out, the portal behind me went dark and shattered. The dwarves were not able to get it working again. Their finest scholars were still fussing over the broken pieces when I came aboveground.”

My face fell: That didn’t bode well for Lancelet. “I don’t understand. The dwarves just happened to have a portal down there leading to Aercanum?”

“No. The portal did not lead there at all the last time it was used. It simply connected to another point in the dwarven kingdom. In fact, the arch had not been used in many years. The dwarves do not like to use portals. They prefer to travel by road.”

“Yet they have many of them?”

“Some. There is a temple in the Siabra court that contains a room full of archways. The dwarves have a place in their capital city that is much the same.”

“Incredible,” I murmured. “None of them lead straight to dragon eggs, do they?”

I caught the bear’s wry expression. “No. They do not. But I believe a similar portal is how we will reach the entrance to the path that will take us to the eggs.”

“So you arrived in Thrazdummar,” I said, still curious. “And the dwarves just accepted you? They didn’t try to attack you or anything?”

“Why would they attack me?” Hawl looked confused.

“Well,” I said, flustered, “a huge bear in armor steps out of a portal that hasn’t been used in who knows how long …”

“I came in peace,” Hawl said mildly. “However, I did inform them of what would happen should they attempt to attack me.”

“The stew speech, no doubt,” I muttered. “And then they just … invited you to tea?”

“There was no tea. There was ale. I was brought to the Stone Keepers. I informed them of my mission.” Hawl tilted their head. “Zaira is a quick-witted woman. She put the pieces together.”

My heart sped up. “That whatever is happening in Aercanum is mirroring what’s happening to the Veil here.”

Hawl nodded. “Whatever magic that was used to create the Veil in the first place is crumbling—not just in Sangratha but on the other side.”

“The mist.” I thought for a moment. “What exactly is coming through the mist?”

“Creatures not of Aercanum,” Hawl said simply. “Perhaps we will encounter similar things when we go below tomorrow.”

I certainly hoped not. I glanced out the window and saw that night had fallen. Over on the bed, Blake and I still had satchels and clothing laid out. It was strange to think that just a few months ago, we’d have been doing homework at this time of night. Now here we were packing for a quest to save the world.

Hawl followed my gaze. They rose to their feet, their head nearly hitting the iron chandelier that hung over the sitting area. “You should rest, little cub. We have a long journey ahead of us. We can speak more along the way.”

I nodded, still feeling dazed from the letter. A few moments ago, the room had felt so full. Now it was empty again.

The bear touched my shoulder with a large brown-furred paw. “Shall I tell Blake to return to you now?”

Blake had gone down to the Drakharrow common room to get something to eat. I nodded. “Yes, please.” The bear lumbered toward the door. “Hawl. Wait.” And then I was flying across the room and into the Ursidaur’s huge padded arms. “I’m so glad you came,” I whispered against their fur. I closed my eyes, remembering how safe I’d felt as a baby being held by them. “Thank you.”

Hawl’s voice rumbled in a deep purr against my chest. “For you? Always, little cub. No matter the distance.”

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CHAPTER 41

BLAKE



It only took me approximately three long minutes after Hawl showed up to realize I was in the way.

I mean, not physically. Because to be honest, the bear could probably have picked me up and dumped me out in the hallway like an unwanted kitten if they'd wanted to. Which was … not exactly good for my ego.

Anyhow, I'd watched Hawl pass Pendragon the letter from her family. When she opened it, her face had gotten pretty wobbly. Then Hawl had glared at me—at least I was pretty sure that was a glare; with all the fur, it was hard to tell—and then I'd scooted out into the hallway and heard the door bang after me.

I decided I'd give them an hour, then check back.

I suspected that when I returned, Pendragon's face was going to be red and wet. Maybe her nose would even be a little runny.

If that were the case, I'd show that bloody bear the door. Then I'd scoop my girl up into my arms, lay her on the bed, dab at her nose with a kerchief gently, and you know, just kiss all her problems away.

Something like that.

No one made my little dragon cry. Not even a fucking talking bear.

In this case, it wasn't the bear per se but the letter, so I was allowing it. Because I knew Pendragon needed to hear from her family. But fuck, the aftermath was going to be brutal.

I just hoped the letter didn't have instructions on how to get rid of me. It probably did, but knowing Pendragon, she wouldn't follow them. She'd probably tease me about it forever, though.

I pounded down the stairs to the Drakharrow common room. The space was comfortable, even now with the world in turmoil. Dark wood, deep red

rugs, black leather sofas that had probably already survived a century of boots and blood.

There was always food in the common room. The place could be falling apart at the seams, and there'd probably still be a side table set up with plates and trays. I wandered over, pouring myself a cup of kava and grabbing a bun. It was fresh from the oven and stuffed with spiced meat. As I turned, my coffee in one hand, the bun halfway to my mouth again, I caught movement in one of the alcoves by the window. My eyes got there before my brain could and … I froze.

Vaughn sat there on the bench. Theo was with him—more like on top of him. They weren't indecent per se, they were fully clothed, but wrapped around each other in a way that suggested they'd forgotten the rest of the world existed. Theo's mouth was at Vaughn's throat. His hand cupped the back of his boyfriend's neck protectively. Vaughn's head was tipped back against the wall of the alcove, his eyes half-lidded, one hand fisted in my cousin's shirt.

The moment was so intimate that I didn't know what to do. I couldn't look away, couldn't move. Finally my body kicked into gear for me. I took an instinctive step back, and my kava sloshed over the side of the cup and onto my hand. I cursed before I could stop myself.

Instantly, the spell broke. Theo broke away from Vaughn's neck, blood rimming his lips.

"Shit, I'm sorry," I blurted out.

I turned away so fast I walked into the buffet table. Damn, that hurt. I'd have a bruise on my hip. *Smooth, Drakharrow.* Maybe Pendragon would kiss it better. I crossed the room, found the farthest couch I could, and sat down with my back very deliberately angled away from the alcove. My face felt hot, which was stupid. I wasn't twelve, just a perfectly mature, completely emotionally balanced, and in no way toxic or morally fucked-up twenty-five-year-old highblood man, thank you very much.

I took a sip of the kava and burned my tongue. *Fuck. Just fucking perfect.* I tried to force my shoulders to loosen up. My mind kept going back to the image of Theo and Vaughn. Don't get me wrong, there'd been nothing arousing about it. But they'd looked … well, beautiful, I guess. I'd never seen my cousin like that with anyone. The way he'd touched Vaughn had been so tender. I wondered if that was how I looked with Pendragon. Was it weird that I was thinking that?

Vaughn Sabino … Not too long ago he'd wanted me in chains. I knew he and Theo had sorted that out. We hadn't talked, but I'd forgiven him—and it wasn't as if he owed me an apology after what I'd done, especially considering he was blightborn. But seeing him like that—soft and trusting, letting a highblood hold him—made something twist in my chest.

I was just thinking of heading to the library or taking a walk outside when a hand slapped my back hard enough for the sip of kava I'd just taken to go down the wrong way. I coughed and choked as Theo dropped onto the couch opposite me, looking like he owned it—which we basically did—and grinning like nothing had happened.

"You trying to kill me, cuz?" I coughed again, then set down the cup.

"Maybe," Theo said, cheerfully. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

I glared at him.

"Never took you for a snooper." Theo whistled.

"A snooper? I'm not a fucking snooper." I glared at him, then saw he was teasing. "Dammit, Theo. I didn't mean to see that. I said I was sorry."

He leaned back, resting his head on his arms. "I know. Relax." He eyed me curiously. "I guess I'm just trying to make sense of the look on your face when you saw us."

I nodded. "You looked so happy. Both of you. It seemed like a perfect moment. I'm sorry I spoiled it."

"You didn't spoil it, you asshole."

I laughed. "All right, then." I looked at him. "I'm really glad, you know. Glad you have Vaughn. I'm happy that you're happy."

"It feels wrong to be so happy sometimes, with all that's going on," Theo said. "And Vaughn … Sometimes I'm shocked he still wants to see my face after all I've put him through."

"You didn't put him through anything—Viktor did." I picked up my cup and took a careful sip. "How is Vaughn, these days?"

"He lost his grandmother. She and his grandfather raised him when his parents died. Oh, and then he was tortured and fed from against his will. But he's fucking great." Theo sighed, then ran a hand over his face. "He's healing. He says being with me helps. Hard to believe, right?"

"Not at all. You're good company."

"Vaughn's grandfather's still in rough shape, though. He got an infection from the wounds the chain left. I brought him to see our healers." He was looking at me like it was a question.

“Good,” I said at once. “I hope Ailith didn’t give you any trouble. You know she can be a stickler for the rules.”

Theo laughed. “I reminded her my name was on the tower, and that shut her up. She’s a good healer, though. Funny how she loves highblood rules.” His face clouded. “It’s pretty fucked up, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“That the man who did this to Vaughn both times is none other than the man who created me.”

“Created half of you,” I said quietly.

“Viktor is Aryel’s brother,” he said bluntly. “Or at least half.”

I sighed. “I don’t know if we’re ever going to know where the fuck Viktor came from or who his parents really were.”

“Sure, but there was at least a little bit of incest involved in my creation.” Theo looked devastated. Like he was trying to keep his face from crumpling as he said the words.

“I don’t care about that,” I said bluntly. “I don’t think Vaughn cares.” I thought of something. “Does Vaughn know?”

“He does now. I told him earlier today.” Theo was quiet for a moment. “He said the same thing you did.”

I was relieved. “Good. Because it’s true.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any less disgusting.”

“You haven’t changed. This is who you’ve always been. And as for the incest thing … well, you took the same history classes I did. At one point, highbloods married their siblings or aunts or uncles all the time. It was just something the elite did.”

“To keep their bloodlines strong,” Theo repeated. “Sure. That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“It makes you more pure. Practically highblood royalty.” I grimaced. “Fuck. Even I can’t make that joke work.”

Theo laughed. “Thanks for trying. But I don’t think I’m more pure. If anything …” He met my eyes. “Don’t you think that anyone carrying any of Viktor’s blood in their veins must be, well, tainted?”

“No, I fucking don’t,” I said immediately. “Look, Theo, you’re not Viktor. You and Vaughn are the ultimate proof of that.”

He looked confused.

“Think about it. This is the part of you that Viktor has always wanted to change, right? He wanted Vaughn out of the picture. He thought the fact

that you could love a blightborn and a male was the worst thing about you."

"Right," Theo said slowly.

I grinned. "So that makes it the best part. I mean, maybe not the best, but it means there's this whole part of you that is just you. That's nothing like Viktor. Or like Aryel," I added.

"Mother is a bit of a bigot as well," Theo agreed. "Isn't it great to have parents?" He blanched as he realized what he'd just said. "Shit, I'm sorry."

I waved a hand. "Don't worry about it." I hesitated. "Would it help if I told you my father wasn't all he was cracked up to be either? You're not alone in feeling disappointed and disillusioned." I filled him in fast on the whole Peacebringer bullshit.

Theo stared at me. "Here I thought Uncle Alex was one of the good ones."

I sighed and slunk down on the couch a little lower. "Yeah. Me, too."

We were quiet for a while. "So we both came from monsters," Theo said at last.

"Don't make me punch you," I muttered.

Theo smirked. "You wouldn't."

"Try me. I'm a delicate flower these days, haven't you heard? I have the emotional fragility of an eggshell."

Theo laughed. It was good to see him smiling.

"Pendragon kicked me out of our room. That's why I'm down here swooning on this couch in the first place, you know," I complained.

"If she did, she probably had a good reason."

"Letter from her family. Guess that's a good reason," I grumbled. "But fuck that bear."

"Hawl does seem, um, a little protective."

"Hawl wants to murder me in my sleep. And we're about to go camping together," I groused. "So that's going to be fun."

Theo couldn't stop laughing. I waited until he'd pulled himself together.

"So, three out of four of our parents are shitty. But at least none of them were bears. And hey, at least your mom was good, right?" Theo looked at me, as if worried he'd said something wrong.

"Yeah," I said after a second. "She was the best." I took a sip of kava. It was lukewarm, but I didn't want to grab a refill and ruin the moment—again. "Look, I've been meaning to tell you about her."

"Desdemona?"

I nodded. “I went to the temple. Had a little chat with High Priestess Hallowyn.”

“So your mom … she’s not in the temple?” Theo’s eyes had widened.

I shook my head. “Of course not. I was an idiot to believe she ever was. I mean, maybe she was for a while. A few days, before they sent her away.”

“Away where?” Theo’s face was pale. “Blake, is your mother dead?”

I exhaled slowly. “It’s a pretty fucked-up story. You sure you want to hear it?”

“Tell me.”

My hand tightened around the mug. “My mother didn’t just leave us to hide out in the temple like Viktor made it sound. I think she was trying to protect Aenia and me. Probably you, too. She sacrificed herself. Viktor used her to fortify the Veil. Hallowyn called her—” the words were hard to say “—a Living Relic.” I filled him in. When I was finished, Theo’s eyes were wide.

“Bloodmaiden, that’s fucked up.” He clapped a hand over his mouth. “Shit. Can we even say that word anymore?”

I shrugged. “It sure doesn’t roll off the tongue as easily as it once did.”

“We’re going to need a new curse.” I knew he was trying to lighten the mood, and I was grateful.

I glanced over at the stairs, wondering if I should go back up.

“You still thinking about Medra?”

“Still? I never stop.”

Theo’s gaze softened. “You love her.”

I wasn’t even going to bother denying it. Maybe the old Blake would have. But the new Blake was all about acknowledging his feelings. “Obviously I love her. She’s unbearable. Stubborn. Reckless. Makes friends with murderous bears. She’s a menace.” Theo was grinning. “She’s mine,” I said, the word immediately making my heart feel tight. “So yeah. I love her. She says I can’t burn the world down for her to prove it, though.”

“Stubborn girl,” Theo murmured. “So unfair for you, being a dragon and all.”

“It’s bullshit,” I agreed. “But I guess I’ll play along. She’s got me wrapped around her little finger.”

Theo was laughing again. “I think you like it that way.”

“I’m a tame dragon when it comes to her.” I set down my mug. “Looks like you feel the same way about Vaughn.”

Theo was still smiling. “We got lucky, didn’t we?”

“Didn’t seem like luck when Viktor was forcing us together, but shit if it wasn’t the best thing he’s ever done in his wretched life.” I looked at my cousin, remembering. “Maybe second-best.” I leaned back on the couch, wondering what Pendragon was doing right now. What she was thinking, feeling.

“So, you’re staying at Bloodwing,” I said at last. “And I’m leaving.” Theo and I looked at one another in silence for a moment. “What made you decide to stay?”

Theo’s lips twitched. “Regan.”

“Sorry. I think I just had a stroke. What was that again?”

Theo smirked. “Never thought I’d be saying it either.”

“Regan.” I picked my words carefully. “She’s not the girl she once was.”

“No,” Theo agreed. “I never thought I’d be saying this, but if she’s going to be the headmistress again, then she needs support.” He met my eyes. “I’ve talked to Lysander. Regan’s fragile right now. She doesn’t know how to ask for help. Or how to accept it.”

I grimaced. “Sounds familiar.” I frowned. “Kage and Lysander seem …”

“Yeah,” Theo agreed, meeting my eyes. “They do *seem*.”

“Something’s going on there. Not sure what, exactly,” I murmured.

“Whatever it is, I think it’s a good thing. They’ll help Regan. So will Vaughn and I. Together, we’ll help protect the blightborn students at Bloodwing. Vaughn’s grandfather is going to be living at the school, too. Once he’s in better shape, he’s going to start a new job working in the refectory.” He met my eyes. “This school’s not perfect, but it’s ours. We can’t let Elaria and the other high-bloods fuck it up again.”

I nodded. “I’m going to miss you. A lot. But you’re doing the right thing. I know it kills Pendragon to be leaving, but …”

We had to trust the plan. But I couldn’t say that. Not even to Theo.

“So, tomorrow,” Theo said softly.

“Tomorrow,” I confirmed. “Bright and early.”

Theo glanced around. I followed his gaze, but the common room was still empty.

“A dwarven quest for dragon eggs,” he said, his voice low. “That sentence doesn’t sound real.” Then he grinned ruefully. “But then, neither does the idea of my cousin being a dragon.”

I grimaced. “It’s real. I still wish it wasn’t, but …”

“But if you weren’t, this wouldn’t work.” He studied me. “What are you afraid of?”

“Afraid of? I’m afraid of fucking everything up, Theo. I’m afraid we’ll be too late. I’m scared Viktor will get those eggs, and we’ll all be left in the rubble. I’m scared I’ll do something terrible again. Something worse than anything Viktor could possibly do.”

“That won’t happen.”

I shrugged. “I’m scared for Pendragon. I’m scared that she’s going, but I’d be scared to leave her behind.”

Theo chuckled. “As if she’d let you leave her behind.” He was quiet for a moment. “So, what happens if you succeed?”

I stared at my hands. “Best-case scenario? We get the eggs. We keep them away from Marcus, Catherine, and Viktor. We buy some time. End game? Maybe Bloodwing becomes a real school, not just a training ground for cruelty. Maybe Sangratha becomes a place where blightborns have some say in things.”

Theo whistled. “Lofty goals.”

“Then, there’s the worst case,” I said quietly. “Viktor gets all the dragons. He uses Florence like a puppet. He cracks open the Veil. Worlds collide. Things crawl out of the dark that don’t belong here. Highbloods switch from worshiping the Bloodmaiden to idolizing our uncle for all eternity because they’re terrified and he’s terrifying and terror makes everyone stupid.”

Theo’s eyes went flinty. “We can’t let that happen.”

“No,” I said softly. “We can’t.”

“I can think of a worse scenario,” Theo said.

“Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“I lose you.” He took a deep breath. “When you get down there, don’t be a hero, all right?”

“Me a hero?” I snorted. “I’ve never done anything heroic in my life. You know I’m a huge fuck up.”

Theo didn’t crack a smile. “I’m serious. Come back, Blake.”

“My priority is Pendragon. She’s not allowed to die.” I tried to lighten my tone. “If she did, I’d be unbearable to live with.”

My cousin snorted. “You’re already unbearable.”

I smiled. We sat another moment, listening to the fire crackling nearby. “We’re quite the pair, aren’t we? Wonder what your mother would say if she

could see us now," Theo said, a little too lightly. "You've got a murderous bear in your room, a consort who likes collecting revolutions like jewelry, and an ex who's about to be the best headmistress this fucked-up school's ever seen. Meanwhile, I have a cousin who's a killer dragon, a boyfriend who keeps nearly getting killed because he has awful taste in men, and a surprise father who's the harbinger of the apocalypse."

I chuckled. "Sounds about right."

"If that's our generation, what the fuck is the next one going to be like?"

I blinked. "The next one?"

"Yeah. Our kids. You haven't thought about it?"

I shook my head, feeling stunned. "You have?"

"Sure. Vaughn and I have talked about the future. We want kids. There are a lot of orphans in Veilmar right now."

I stared at my cousin. Then I realized how right it was. "Shit. You're going to make a great dad, Theo."

He laughed. "I mean, not anytime soon. Let's try to make it through the world not ending first."

"I haven't thought that far ahead," I said slowly. I suddenly wondered if Pendragon had.

"Talk to Medra," Theo said, like he'd read my mind. "Find out what her dreams are. When this is all over, you don't have to be trapped in someone else's expectations anymore. Neither does she."

"Right." When this was all over.

Theo glanced over my shoulder. Someone was coming down the stairs. Someone with very loud, heavy footsteps.

I stood up quickly. "Get over here, cuz."

Theo looked surprised but did as I said. I grabbed him and pulled him into a tight embrace. "I fucking love you, Theo."

"I love you, too," he mumbled, sounding like he might be crying.

I punched him lightly in the shoulder. "All right. Time to check on my girl."

I turned to face the stairs where I knew Hawl would be standing.

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CHAPTER 42

BLAKE



The murderous bear was planted at the foot of the stairs like a giant brown boulder—a boulder with an ax. They lifted their head as I approached and for a moment, with the lamplight catching their dark eyes, they looked almost … gentle. “How is she?” I demanded.

Hawl’s nostrils flared. “She is fine.”

My chest tightened. “You sure you don’t want to tell me the truth? Because I’m going to see for myself in a moment.”

The bear huffed. “She read the letter.”

I exhaled in impatience. “And?”

“She cried.”

Something hot and protective surged beneath my ribs. Of course she did. My heart clenched thinking about my girl sitting upstairs alone with tear-tracked cheeks. “You—” I stopped myself, just barely. I wanted to take this out on the bear, but I was pretty sure the bear hadn’t written the letter. Hell, I didn’t even know if bears knew how to write. Even in Camelot.

But it was too late. The Ursidaur’s head inclined toward mine. I saw sharp teeth behind black lips. “You believe I harmed her?”

I bared my fangs. “I mean, you did bring the letter.”

“A letter she needed to read.” The bear’s eyes seemed to narrow. “She did not cry because of me. I would not cause her harm.”

“Methinks the bear has their fur up,” I snapped before I could help myself. “Here’s what you’re not saying. Pendragon needs me. Now, are you going to get out of my way or not?”

The bear studied me. There was nothing benevolent about their stare. They were judging me—silently but somehow loudly. I knew because I’d met plenty of highbloods. But this felt … a little different. More parental. I

knew I was being evaluated by someone who had loved Medra since she was small enough to be carried. I knew I was standing in front of the kind of creature who didn't give a shit about my title or my house or my bloodline. A creature who might, even now, be weighing whether or not they should let me keep breathing.

Then, "She does not need you."

I stared back at the bear. "That's bullshit."

Hawl growled. "Watch your tongue, cub."

"I'm not your fucking cub." I inhaled, tried again. "But respectfully, Hawl the Ursidaur, that's bullshit." Hawl's expression didn't change, but they also didn't growl again. Had I just earned myself a point for using manners?

"Medra has survived without you. She has survived men who believed they owned her. She has survived betrayal. Loss. Bloodshed."

"I'm aware," I said tightly. "You know, I was even there for some of it. Might have saved her from a little of the bloodshed. You weren't around, though, so what would you know? I'm the one who's been there for her these past two years. Me."

"She does not need you," Hawl repeated, as if saying it to me enough times might actually convince me it was true.

I bared my fangs. "She's strong enough not to need me, you're right about that. But she does. Want. Me."

We stared at one another. Hawl's paw tightened on the ax. For a heartbeat, I wondered if I'd have to fight a bear in my own common room. Then Hawl said, very stiffly, "She asked where you'd gone."

There it was.

The bear looked at me, their eyes dangerous. "Do not look at me as if you know her pain better than I do," Hawl rumbled.

I lifted a hand, palm out. Not in surrender. Just acknowledgment.

"You've known her all her life," I said simply. "But I know what it looks like when she hurts and tries to hide it."

Hawl stared at me in silence for a long moment. The ax didn't swing. Finally, "What are your intentions with Medra Pendragon?"

My intentions. I'd asked Nyxaris the same thing a few nights ago. I almost laughed out loud. But I knew that would be the wrong move if I did, maybe my last one. The bear hadn't asked *Do you love her?* Though, I did. Nor had they asked *Are you worthy?* Because we both knew I wasn't. Not

even *Will you marry her?* Because within highblood tradition, Pendragon and I were already bound. The bloodmarks on our wrists were proof of that. I wondered if she'd told Hawl I couldn't live without her—literally. I wondered if she'd told them about Regan and how I'd set my other consort aside. The optics of that weren't great, so I kind of hoped not.

My jaw tightened. I had to force myself to breathe. I knew that for all intents and purposes, I wasn't really talking to Hawl right now at all. I was speaking to a standin for Medra's aunt and uncle. To the people who were the closest thing to living, breathing parents she'd ever have. Orcades was her mother, yes. But I'd never be able to look Orcades in the face.

So I didn't talk back. I answered the question. "I intend to keep her alive. I intend to guard her and keep her safe. I intend to be there for her—always. I intend to be the one she can always fall apart with, without any consequences." I took a breath, and my voice came out a little rougher than I'd meant. "There is no one else in this world or any other for me but Medra Pendragon. I care nothing for power, my house, not even the Veil. None of it has any meaning. Nothing but her."

Hawl watched me, their round eyes unblinking.

I shifted my stance, hands curling into fists. "I'd die before I let anyone take her from me. And I'd kill anyone who kept me from getting to her."

The room around us was quiet. For a moment, I thought the bear would challenge me and we'd have to duel right then and there. But instead, they said in a softer rumble, "You say you would die."

"I would," I said immediately. "Happily."

The Bearkin's head tilted. "Would you live for her, too?"

The question hit hard. I swallowed. "Yes. That's all I want, to give her a good life. The one she deserves."

Hawl stared at me. Then, slowly, they shifted to the side. My way was no longer blocked. I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. Funny how that tended to happen in these situations. I hesitated. Strangely, I felt I owed the bear something in return. "I love her," I said at last. "And she loves me."

"So I have gathered," the bear growled, as if they didn't appreciate the annoying reminder.

"But," I said quickly, "she needs you. I know she's happy you're here. I hope …" I hesitated, feeling fierce and tender and protective toward Pendragon all at once. After all, this was her family. If I couldn't be

gracious to her family, then what the fuck was I even doing claiming I loved her? “I hope you know you’re welcome here. You are a guest of my house and kin to my consort. I hope we can be … friends.” The bear said nothing. I started to move past. Then I paused, glancing over my shoulder at the bear, unable to help myself. “Glad I didn’t have to kill you to get to her.”

Hawl’s eyes narrowed. “You would not have succeeded had you tried. Now, go. She is waiting.”

“Don’t be too sure about that,” I muttered, turning back to the stairs. “You’ve never fought a dragon.”



I opened the door. Pendragon had asked for me. Maybe that should have made me feel like a hero. So why did I feel like a sinner walking toward something pure and holy with dirty hands? The room smelled like *us*. Jasmine and mint. Apples and autumn leaves. The fire in the hearth had burned low, leaving the room enveloped in a soft, warm light. Pendragon was curled up in an armchair by the fire, her knees pulled up to her chest. I could see the letter, dropped on the floor by the foot of the chair. I wanted to throw the blood-damned thing in the fire, as if it was the guilty party in all of this.

I closed the door and moved slowly across the room, taking in my girl’s blotchy face, her lashes wet with tears. Her lower lip looked pinker than usual, as if she’d been biting it to keep herself from crying too hard. She looked up at me, and my heart tightened painfully. It didn’t matter that I’d been expecting this, that I’d braced myself for it. It hit me anyway. Her pain was visceral to me, like someone had reached into my ribs and twisted.

“Little dragon,” I said softly. Maybe it was strange to still be calling her that, considering what I was, but it felt right. Maybe I was the dragon, but she’d always brought the fire.

Pendragon looked up at me, and I saw the way the letter had broken right through her armor. I saw the little girl she used to be. I dropped to my knees beside her chair and gathered her into my arms as if she weighed nothing at all. For a moment, her body was stiff. Then she went soft against me. Her surrender felt like a gift.

“I’ve got you, Pendragon,” I said, my voice husky. “I’ve got you, little dragon.”

She clutched my shirt with both hands as I lifted her, carrying her to the couch. The cushions sank under my weight as I half sat, half lay back and pulled her down on top of me, cradling her in my arms. She made a small, broken sound and looked up at me. I kissed the corner of her eye, tasting salt.

“You’re so strong, Pendragon,” I murmured. “But you don’t have to always be strong with me. Let yourself cry.”

Her body shook. The tears came, silent at first, then harder. She tried to turn her face away, as if embarrassed by them, but I wouldn’t let her do that. I slid my hand into her hair, smoothing it back from her damp cheeks. Her hair might have been wild like flames, but it was soft to the touch.

“I hate this,” she said finally, her voice breaking. “I hate that it hurts.”

“I know, little dragon, I know.” I wouldn’t ask her questions. She’d tell me when she was ready.

Her fingers twisted in my shirt. I could feel her skin warm against my chest. “I don’t know why I’m so sad. They’re alive. All of them.”

I felt a strange swell of relief. “Thank the Bloodmaiden.” Another expression that would never be the same, but time and tradition made it roll off my tongue, nevertheless.

“They have children. Morgan and Draven have twins. A little boy and girl. I have cousins, and I didn’t even know. Orcades didn’t tell me. I don’t think she even knew herself. For years, I didn’t know if they were dead or alive. And they didn’t know if I was either,” she whispered.

“Your mother did a good thing, then,” I murmured, smoothing down her curls. We’d table the topic of Orcades bringing down the wrath of Pendragon’s uncle and Hawl on my head.

“I thought I’d left them to die,” she whispered.

My chest clenched. “You didn’t leave them to die—you saved them. You gave up everything. Absolutely fucking everything. You don’t think they know that? If they love you, they know that, little dragon.”

She shifted, settling against me with a little sigh that sounded more like contentment than sadness. “They love me. They mourned me.”

I thought about that for a few minutes. Then I kissed her hair. “I’m sorry. That’s really messed up.”

“When I was reading the letter,” she whispered, “it felt like they were in the room with me. It felt like having a family again. I’d forgotten what that felt like.” She twisted, looking up at me as I brushed the back of my hand gently over her cheekbone. “They wanted to come. But they couldn’t. The Veil …” She gave a bitter laugh.

I groaned. “The world found another way to fuck us over?”

“Basically, yes.”

I kissed her, right at the corner of her mouth. “Listen to me, the world can be terrible. But it can’t take everything. Not from you.”

“My aunt mentioned you, you know. Apparently Orcades told her you were *charming*.” Pendragon’s mouth twitched, which I knew was a good sign.

“Did she, now?” I drawled, trying to channel lovable arrogance in an attempt to make her laugh—which she did. “Excuse me? You find that comical? I am fucking charming, Pendragon.”

She laughed harder; the sound was like beautiful bells ringing.

I kissed her forehead. “There’s my girl.”

Her eyes squeezed shut. She pressed her face into my neck, breathing me in. I may have sniffed her hair a little. We stayed like that for a while. I rubbed my hand in slow circles over her spine.

Finally, she spoke. “Blake … are you scared?”

I held very still. “About tomorrow?”

“And all that comes after tomorrow.”

“We’ll be together. That’s all that matters.” I kissed her hair. “You want to go do something fun?”

She lifted her head a little and gave me a suspicious look. “You mean something dangerous?”

I grinned. “It’s me. So maybe a little. Come with me.” I helped her sit up, laced my fingers through hers, and led her to the door. We climbed the spiral stairs.

“We should have gone to class today,” Pendragon whispered, as if reading my thoughts. “We’ve probably missed so much.”

I snorted. “You really worried about your grades right now? Does that mean you’re bringing homework tomorrow?”

“Of course not,” she said, with dignity. “I’m considering it a field trip.”

I wanted to say she sounded a hell of a lot like Florence. I nearly asked her if she planned to write an essay about our travels when she got back, but

I held my tongue. I pushed open the door to the rooftop. The wind hit us immediately, salty and refreshing. I watched Pendragon's hair whip into a red storm around her head. She looked young, her green eyes wide and still bright from recently shed tears.

I stepped away from her and let my dragon rise completely. Heat surged in waves from beneath my skin. My body shifted, stretching and reshaping itself into something new and different. My wings unfurled, huge and red. And then there I was: an Inferni dragon on the top of the tower, crimson and immense.

"Holy fuck," Pendragon whispered. But she didn't step back.

I lowered my head, close enough that my dragon breath warmed her cheeks. Her eyes shone with excitement.

Blake.

I felt her voice inside me like a touch. I let out a low rumbling growl that vibrated through the stones. *Get on. Let me show you the world, Pendragon.*

She gave a glorious, breathtaking laugh, her mouth splitting wide. *What is this—your idea of a romantic date?*

I mean, kind of? But my answer didn't matter much. She was already climbing up, her boots scraping gently against my scales as she grabbed, finding the ridges along my neck. She paused partway up. *What is it?* I asked, worried. *Stuck?*

Not stuck. Her voice sounded tentative. *Can I … can I touch it? Your wing?*

I held myself very still, thinking.

I never dared to ask Nyxaris, she added quickly. *It's all right if that would be … weird.*

It's not weird. Of course. You can touch me wherever you want.

I sensed her hand lifting slowly. Then I felt it. Her palm, settling against the membrane of my wing. A shiver rolled through me, quick and involuntary. It started at the base of my wing and rippled through my whole body.

Shit. I'm sorry. I felt her hand withdraw.

No, it's fine. I exhaled. *It felt … pretty fucking good, actually*, I admitted.

I could sense her smiling. *Really?*

Yeah. But maybe … you should wait to do that until …

Until what?

Until I'm ready for something like that. Shit, could dragons blush? I felt like I was blushing. *Now, get on, Pendragon. You want a ride or not?*

She laughed and continued her climb. *All right, all right*.

Before I lose my fucking mind, I muttered softly.

I can hear that, you know.

I felt my maw split. Did dragons grin? That grump Nyxaris probably didn't. As for my uncle—Viktor's head would probably fall off if he ever tried.

I gathered my wings and launched. Bloodwing fell away beneath us. Pendragon made a sound that was half gasp and half delighted curse and clung tighter. She knew what she was doing, I told myself, as I felt a pang of concern thinking of how high we were. The last time she'd been wrapped in my arms it had been different. This time … well, she seemed so small up there, perched on my back. I could hardly feel her at all unless I focused. Then another bright, giddy laugh spilled out of her like it had been trapped, and I stopped thinking about anything but showing my girl a good time.

Faster, she demanded breathlessly. *Go faster*.

I banked hard, enjoying the way she screamed in surprise. The wind roared. The ocean waves were tiny white specks below us. I flew farther and farther out over the water. Up here, nothing could touch us. With Pendragon on my back, everything felt … right.

I forgot I could be this happy, she whispered. *And to have this feeling with you.*

I know. It feels like …

Like magic, she supplied.

Yes. I focused, feeling her breathing against my scales, the weight of her thighs against my back.

There are beautiful things in the world, Blake, she murmured. I felt her hands loosen slightly from where she'd been gripping my spines. Because she trusted me. *Blake*, she said.

Yeah?

Thank you for reminding me.

I carried my rider through the night, with the stars sparkling above us, the darkness as our shield. Everything else might be falling apart. But we still had this. We still had each other. And we always would.

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CHAPTER 43

MEDRA



The Dragon Court was quiet and dark as we gathered early the next morning. Classes wouldn't begin for another four hours. It was strange to think of students still asleep, safely buried under blankets, worrying about nothing more than their unfinished essays. The thought made the knots in my stomach deepen, not in jealousy exactly, but with an aching awareness of how lucky they were. Though the truth, of course, was that they weren't safe. Not really. They all had their own terror to carry, their own traumas to recover from. Another wave of the plague could sweep through at any time. The memory of what had happened to Veilmar was burned in everyone's minds. That didn't fade so fast.

But still, for the most part, they didn't know what we knew. I envied them that. They didn't know about Marcus and Catherine trying to crack the Veil like a piece of glass. They didn't know Viktor had been orchestrating all of this for years. If anything, the blightborn probably saw his departure as some kind of reprieve. They didn't know there were more dragons.

And best of all, they didn't know, didn't think, didn't *care* about Florence.

My throat tightened at the thought of her. These last few days, my body had started guarding that name from my own mind. But she was out there, somewhere in the dark, somewhere within Viktor's reach. I didn't know what was happening to her, what had already happened. And the not knowing was its own special kind of torture.

A gust of wind blew in off the cliffs, and I inhaled slowly, savoring the cold air. It felt like I'd been waiting for this for so long. Now, finally, we were here. Finally, we were leaving. Soon we'd be belowground. Was there wind in the dwarven kingdom? We were preparing to go underneath the

world—that was the part that didn't feel quite real. This wasn't a few cramped tunnels with low ceilings and torches for light, like the passages just below Bloodwing, this was an entire other realm, one that stretched out below the continent of Sangratha, mirroring it like a shadow. Zaira had been little help: The descriptions she'd given us had been short and matter-of-fact. But my mind had managed to fill in some of the gaps. I knew there were cities, towns, too. I'd tried to imagine them: cities carved into rock, wide stone streets and bridges that spanned underground gorges. Of course, we'd be bypassing the populated regions of Thrazdummar. Our journey would take us on a farless-traveled route. The road would be desolate and dangerous.

Around me was the evidence of all our preparation. The court was cluttered with supplies: bedrolls and lanterns, tents and coils of ropes, crates of rations and bandages and blankets. It was more than we could carry. Fortunately, the dwarven delegation included some attendants who would help us get our gear to the starting point. I was still vague about where exactly that was—Lord Dinesh Sharma, Blake, and Professor Sankara had gone ahead to check the passage below Bloodwing for us, so I would soon find out. I was grateful we'd have help along the way.

I watched Rodriguez hover over a basket of books and parchments like a mother hen guarding her nest. He looked like he hadn't slept all night, his hair rumpled, sleeves rolled up, and shirt collar unbuttoned. He frowned down at a pile of supplies and began rearranging them frantically. "No, no, no," I heard him mutter. Then, more loudly, "Who the hell put the herbal tinctures beside the lamp oil—do you have any idea how dangerous that is? These are flammable remedies. *Flammable*."

A few steps away, Zaira Bloodshield narrowed her eyes at Rodriguez from where she stood inspecting the contents of another crate. She wore a heavy black cloak covered with embroidered gold runes. Her long hair fell down her back in thick braided ropes. "If the arrangements aren't to your satisfaction, Professor Rodriguez, please do feel free to remain at the academy." Zaira's voice took on a dangerous edge. "Must I remind you I am one of the leaders of this expedition? I am not to be spoken to like one of your underling students."

I eyed the Stone Keeper warily. I still hadn't figured out exactly what a Stone Keeper was exactly, but I had a feeling we were going to find out

soon. Regardless, Zaira was someone I had decided I wasn't going to mess around with unless I had no other choice.

Rodriguez apparently had no similar qualms. His head snapped up. "Oh, for fuck's sake, First Stone Keeper. I wasn't challenging your position. Though, it sounds to me like you're rather insecure about your own significance if you must bring it up every time someone speaks within ten paces of you."

Zaira's face flushed with fury, and I found myself covering my mouth. "How dare you—"

"Furthermore, stop trying to get me to stay behind," Rodriguez continued, running right over her outrage and ignoring it. He glanced my way. "There's no way I'm staying at Bloodwing. You need me."

"Do we?" Zaira said sarcastically. "You've visited the dwarven realm often, have you? You know the path we must follow?"

"I know enough," Rodriguez said, his jaw tightening. "I'm also a skilled healer and have a deep breadth of historical knowledge. Not to mention, these are *my* students you're taking into danger. Unlike you, I feel some concern for their safety."

Across the court, someone made a snorting sound. I looked over to see Visha, squatting on a bedroll, sharpening a dagger with a whetstone. She was dressed in black leather armor with a heavy red cloak overtop. A belt of blades sat low on her hips. Her violet eyes were on Rodriguez and the Stone Keeper, and her mouth curled in amusement.

"They're grown adults," Zaira scoffed. "They don't need you to protect them. I assure you, Lord Sharma and I have things well in hand."

"We'll see about that, won't we?" Rodriguez said quietly. "If one of them should be injured—"

"I'm a healer as well," Zaira interrupted. "Need I remind you? We do not require a second healer."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Visha muttered. She jumped to her feet, sliding her dagger into its sheath at her belt, and strode toward them.

But Kazmyn beat her to it. Zaira's brother had been lounging against a pillar. Dark-skinned and handsome in an effortless way, I'd been a little surprised that he and Visha hadn't immediately been taken with each other. Visha seemed to detest Kazmyn, though he was clearly smitten with her. Kazmyn strolled over, hands in his pockets. The halfborn young man wore a fitted charcoal jacket and a dark green scarf looped carelessly around his

neck. His belt was full of small tools and knives that suggested he could pick a lock or stab you, depending on his mood.

"The two of you are adorable, you know," he remarked. "Truly."

"Shut up, Kazmyn," Zaira snapped without looking at her brother.

"No, no. It's true." He smiled brightly with the look of someone who knew exactly how annoying he was being. "You both seem absolutely convinced you are personally responsible for keeping all of Sangratha from collapsing."

Zaira glared at him. "That's because we are."

Kazmyn's grin widened. He glanced my way. "I believe the dragon rider and the dragon might have a larger part to play."

"No one is claiming they don't," Rodriguez said with forced dignity. "Of course Medra and Blake are essential to this endeavor."

"And yet," Visha drawled, stepping closer, "somehow we're all listening to the healers argue loudly about who gets to be the most important."

Someone coughed. Magda Stonefist was carrying a pack that looked twice the size of mine—yet she bore it like it was nothing. Her beard had been neatly braided and decorated with small bronze rings. Her gaze moved from Rodriguez to Zaira to Visha to Kazmyn. "I certainly hope we don't have to listen to the four of you squabble the entire time," she said pointedly. "I've taught many generations of students at this school, and I'll tell you all here and now, I'll have no qualms about making you march apart—or putting you over my knee if I have to."

"Really, Magda?" Rodriguez said icily. "We are not children."

"Then, stop acting like it," she barked. "We're all on edge. But we're a squad." She pointed at me. "We have a leader—Medra, and she isn't a dwarf. Best get over that right now, Zaira."

I colored and cleared my throat. *Shit.* I wished Blake was here to give the speech for me. "All of you are essential to this journey. We need each one of you."

I looked around the courtyard at the members of our squad. Our two bickering healers—Zaira and Rodriguez—and Lord Sharma were also to act as strategists and planners. Magda and Kazmyn were our scouts, one far too smug, the other wiser than I thought any of us had yet to realize. Visha was our elegant highblood warrior, but she'd be supported by Blake and me, as well as Hawl and Sebastian Sankara.

I glanced across the courtyard to where Hawl was crouched with their back to us, one paw gently running over something small and orange and purring. The bear had taken one look at Neville and become completely enamored with the fluffin. Now they were acting like the little creature's personal bodyguard. Considering the dangers we'd be heading into, Neville could do worse than an armored bear as his protector.

The significance of Blake and me forming a squad at Bloodwing to go up against the greatest threat Sangratha had ever known hadn't slipped past me. Bloodwing Academy had always existed for a purpose: The school was an engine designed to feed the four great houses with highly trained personnel. And in times of war, those houses would take their warriors and healers and scouts and strategists and form them into squads of up to fifty, designed not just for fighting but for function. And then they'd fucking attack one another and struggle for position, power, and land.

We weren't fighting for any of those things as far as I was concerned. We were fighting to protect the weak, to shield the innocent, to keep this world from crumbling to pieces. All eleven of us. Three highbloods, one blightborn, four dwarves, a fluffin, a bear, and me, a half-fae dragon rider. Had there ever been a more motley crew?

Kazmyn's dark eyes were bright. "So, are we all going to pretend we're not terrified and doomed to failure?"

"I am not terrified," Zaira snapped. "And I do not fail."

"You're my sister, and I know when you're lying," Kazmyn retorted cheerfully.

Rodriguez gave an awkward laugh. "You two are really quite something." He shook his head. "I'm not terrified, Kazmyn. But I am … appropriately concerned."

Zaira snorted. "You've reorganized that basket four times in the last five minutes. That is terror."

Magda grunted. "All right now, enough whining. We all know what we need to do here. Lord Sharma will be back at any minute. Let's prepare to move out."

I glanced around. Dinesh Sharma got a slightly earlier start than Blake and Sankara; I think they were all just antsy and couldn't wait to get going, which I quite understood. I took a deep breath and looked over at the opening in the stones where they'd descended. I could feel our bond like a restless pull in my chest, heat and hunger and ferocious loyalty. My archon

was our secret weapon—a dragon. And me? I was his rider, the anchor that kept our dragon steady.

Blake? I sent to him. *Everyone is restless. Are you heading back now?*

There was silence for a moment. Then came the response. *We're nearly there. We have a problem*.

My heart sped up. *What do you mean? What kind of a problem?*

But before I could ask more questions, Blake and Sankara appeared, rising up out of the passage at the far end of the courtyard. Blake was decked out in Drakharrow armor. The fitted black-and-red leather molded to every hard line of his torso. He'd let his hair grow out these last few weeks; it hit just below his jaw now, but this morning he'd pulled it back. My breath caught—with his face unobstructed, he looked different. His crooked aristocratic nose, high cheekbones, and strong jaw looked even sharper and more brutal in the predawn light.

He was beautiful and deadly. He was mine.

Behind him, Sankara cut an imposing figure, as always. His dark skin was set off against practical travel leathers in shades of dark browns and golds, all worn beneath a heavy, long wool coat of dark amethyst. A thick silver beard framed his strong jaw. As Sankara turned his head to look at us, the single gold ring in his ear flashed. I glimpsed the worry lining the highblood professor's face, and my stomach sank. Whatever they had to tell us wasn't going to be good news.

Zaira was already watching them. She took a step forward. "What's wrong?" she demanded, her voice echoing across the stones.

Blake stopped in the center of the court, his gaze going straight to me. "Sankara and I followed Lord Sharma and his guards. We traced his path down to the entrance of the dwarven ruins."

"They are not all ruins," Zaira muttered. "I have told you, it is an illusion. A highly crafted one. Dwarves are expert at these—"

"Zaira." Blake's voice cut her off. "Stop. We weren't going through the city anyhow, correct?" She nodded. He kept his eyes on the Stone Keeper. "We took a right, passed through the ruins until we found the gate you told us would be there."

"Yes, yes," she said impatiently. "And Lord Sharma must be there now, waiting for us."

"No. He's not waiting," Blake snapped. "He's fucking gone."

My breath caught. Lord Sharma and Zaira had told us the gate would only open with dwarven blood. Specifically, the blood of a high-council member or the First Stone Keeper.

"Someone beat us to the gate," Sankara said, his deep voice flat.

Zaira's face was stunned. "Impossible. No one even knew—"

"Someone knew, Zaira," Blake interrupted. "And they were waiting. They slayed the guards, and they must have taken Dinesh."

Kazmyn swore softly. But Zaira just shook her head stubbornly. "The gate would not open without willing blood." She straightened up, lifting her chin. "No one could get through that gate unless Dinesh opened it willingly —which he would never do."

Blake looked at her. "Are you sure about that?"

The First Stone Keeper's eyes flashed. "Of course. Lord Sharma's loyalty to us is not a question."

"No one else was there when Sankara and I arrived," Blake said carefully. "So in that case, I don't think willingness is a requirement on this quest, Zaira … Blood magic doesn't always require consent."

Zaira paled. Before anyone could say anything more, the sound of footsteps came from behind us. I turned to see two men crossing the court. Kage Tanaka approached us like a soldier of shadow, all in black. His black crescent-moon tattoo curved up the side of his neck, stark against his golden skin. He scanned the court with swift assessment, clearly calculating something, his face taut with tension. Right behind him came Lysander Orphos, the calm strength to Kage's powerful darkness.

Kage's gaze landed on Blake. "Lysander and I were up early," he said without preamble. "Patrolling the school."

For a moment, I felt a brief relief. They were staying back with Regan; she'd have their protection as headmistress. Lady Elaria might think Regan a pawn in her corner, but if she ever found out the truth, if Regan ceased being so pliant, Kage and Lysander would be there to help. Now I felt a tug of curiosity—not about the two men's loyalty but about their motives. Maybe a simple desire to protect was all it was, or maybe there was something more to it. I shoved the thought away before it could fully take shape. We had more important things to worry about than the two leaders and the girl they'd become so evidently attached to.

Lysander spoke up. "Some little birds from House Orphos told me a number of House Mortis students are missing."

“As is Alastor Vane,” Kage added, blunt as a blade.

For a heartbeat, no one spoke.

Then, “Vane?” Zaira demanded. “Who is this Vane?”

“He’s the academy’s blood-magic expert,” Blake said, his voice dangerously low. “And I’ll give you ten to one odds that he opened your dwarven gate with Sharma’s blood.”

“What about Silvio?” I asked quickly.

“Silvio’s gone, too,” Kage confirmed.

“Who’s Silvio?” said Kazmyn.

“He’s about to be fucking dead, that’s all you need to know.” I knew Blake had had it out for Silvio ever since the House Mortis leader had laid hands on me. Now I knew Blake would blame himself for not acting sooner.

“As soon as we catch up to him and his squad,” said Magda.

Catch up. Because we weren’t alone now. There was a second squad. And they were already ahead of us. Already treading the path below the surface. Already on their way to the dragon eggs.

“Fucking shit,” said Visha. And as always, she was right.

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CHAPTER 44

REGAN



It was my second first day as headmistress of Bloodwing Academy. I stepped into the reception area of the headmaster's office. No one was there yet, as I'd risen early. When I stepped out of my room, I was surprised to see who *wasn't* there. No wolf lying on the floor. No tall, dark shadow leaning against the wall. No Kage Tanaka. No Lysander Orphos.

Instead a random Avari student stared back at me with wide, panicked eyes as if the sight of me—upright and dressed—was too much for him to handle this early in the morning. I'd told him I was heading down to my office. He'd blurted that he had to come with me. I'd told him if he tried to follow me I'd rip his throat out, and that had quickly ended that conversation.

I walked through the halls of Bloodwing feeling strangely empty. Somehow I'd gotten used to Kage and Lysander always being there, just outside my door, quiet and relentless. They'd tended to me. Saved me. Sent me healers. Guarded me like I was something precious. And now they were gone. But it wasn't like they hadn't done more than enough. I had to get used to being alone again. That was the point, wasn't it?

As for what Viktor had said about Kage and me being mates, well, he'd obviously been delusional, the fevered fantasy of a monster who wanted to turn Kage and me into tools he could control. Whatever he'd been planning to do to me would have failed because I was alone—and I'd probably always be that way. Kage and I weren't mates. He'd basically confirmed that. We were nothing to each other. Tonight I'd pack my things and move back to my own room in the Drakhar-row Tower. I'd been an idiot to let myself stay in Avari even this long.

I peered around the vestibule. Everything looked pretty much the same. I glanced into the boardroom. Well, maybe not everything—I noticed someone had whittled a few lurid carvings off some of the chairs. Good for them. My heels clicked as I paused in front of a tall mirror mounted on the wall next to the secretary's desk. The girl staring back at me was elegant and stylish. Perfectly put-together. Well, almost. Long, gleaming gold hair fell over my shoulders in smooth waves. I'd brushed it that morning until it shone. My outfit was immaculate, a tailored jacket fitted through the waist and shoulders. The lines were flattering but commanding. At least, I thought so. A white silk button-up lay beneath the jacket. On the bottom, a short, pleated skirt showed off my legs. My boots were tall, black, and spiked. Heels hurt, but they made me taller which made me feel more confident. They'd also come in handy on one particular occasion.

I shook my head slightly, thinking of Brocklin and what a moron he'd been.

The jacket was purple to match my eyes. The skirt was a plaid blend of white, gold, and silver. I was wearing the colors of three houses—no red. If anyone had a problem with it, they could take it up with the nearest cliff. After all, I supposedly represented the whole school now, not just Drakharrow. And I looked fucking good in purple.

My gaze dropped to my throat, and I raised a hand to touch the scar. Funny how Viktor had tried to kill me, only to save me. But then, could you really call what he'd done to me *saving*? I pressed two fingers to the edge, feeling the ridge of puckered skin. I'd purposely chosen not to wear a scarf, even though a scarred highblood was worse than a scarred blightborn. Highbloods weren't supposed to scar. Because we weren't supposed to *bleed*. They were. And if we did? It was a sign of weakness. That's what I was supposed to be, though, right? The weak, sheltered, noble little daughter running the school. The girl Elaria Avari thought she could wrap around her little finger.

What was I, really? I still had no idea. But I knew the scar was part of it. I was no longer flawless. I was no longer *pure*. But I'd survived. And I was still standing. If that made someone uncomfortable, that was their problem. They could avert their eyes or, better yet, go fuck themselves. I wasn't going to soften this part of myself for them. I was done asking the world for permission.

Someone cleared their throat behind me, and I turned to see a curvy dwarven girl with wide doe eyes and bright red lipstick.

"Good morning, Dani."

"Good morning, Headmistress Pansera," she squeaked.

I sighed. "At ease, Dani. I'm not going to bite." I gestured to her desk. "Come in. Sit down."

A bit of color rose in her cheeks. "Of course not. I mean, thank you." She glanced at the door behind her. "I wasn't sure what the arrangement would be, with Headmaster Rodriguez leaving."

I smiled faintly. "Well, I could still use a secretary." I gestured to her neatly organized desk. "And it looks like you've been doing a good job."

She blinked with surprise. "Thank you." Then she paled. "But when you go into the office …"

"Yes?"

She flushed. "Well, I haven't had time to tidy up after him yet."

"Ah." I understood. "He was packing in a hurry."

She nodded. She moved behind the desk and quickly began lining up quills. It looked like she even had a color-coded system. I hid a smile as I pushed through the door into my old office and stopped. Rodriguez's things were everywhere. Clothes littered over every surface. Some half-stuffed into backpacks and satchels he'd clearly changed his mind about taking. The desk was covered with papers and books. A half-drunk cup of kava sat on top of a stack of letters beside a half-eaten apple. Behind the desk, the door to the headmaster's storage room stood open. The room was the size of an average school bedroom, and right now it was crammed floor to ceiling with all sorts of miscellaneous junk—though, I suspected Rodriguez would call them *treasures*. Books and scrolls, small trinkets, and glassware lined a floor-to-ceiling shelf. Crates were stacked on the floor, some made of wood, others of metal. There were taller shapes shoved into the back of the small room—tall pieces of furniture covered in dust cloths. Something that looked like a wardrobe or maybe a tall standing mirror. What looked like an old lectern.

I walked over and shut the storage room door with a sigh, then turned to the desk and gingerly tossed the apple into the wastebas-ket. "Right," I murmured.

I started closing books and stacking them, pushing loose parchment into piles. I'd get Dani to sort through everything, but I figured I could at least

get started. Then I'd move it all onto the boardroom table, and she could figure out if the books belonged back in the school library or Rodriguez's personal collection.

My hand paused on an open book containing an illuminated manuscript. The chapter heading had been beautifully illustrated with gold leaf and colorful pigment. Tiny stars and crescent moons hid in the margins alongside small dragons, though the dragons looked more like sea horses to me. Whoever had done the illustration had obviously never seen a real dragon before. I glanced at the title. *The Prophecy of the Pure Maiden.*

Strange title. Was it a children's story of some kind? Curiosity won. I traced the first line lightly with a manicured fingertip. *"Thrice defiant and thrice bound by blood …"*

Probably not a children's story. On second thought, the lines were arranged more like a poem than a paragraph. I wasn't much of a poetry fan, so I moved to close the book when another line popped out at me. *"And in her hands shall lie the fate of many realms …"*

I frowned. Ominous. I wound up reading the whole page.

Thrice defiant and thrice bound by blood, she walks where others cannot tread. And in her hands shall lie the fate of many realms, for the Veil shall be sustained by her dying or undone by her living, and the world shall not endure nor the tyrant be defeated should she refuse the call. You will know her, for the dragon has marked her and called her his own. The marked maiden shall offer the blood of the four …

Well, shit. And here I thought being headmistress a second time was bad. Whoever this *pure maiden* was, I felt a little sorry for her. I also doubted she was all that pure. The book had probably been written by a naïve male scribe who believed virginity was the most precious thing a woman could ever possess. Gross. Not only was this poor woman apparently supposed to be a virgin, but it sounded a lot like she was meant to die. Why the hell had Rodriguez been reading such weird things, anyhow? I snapped the book shut and stacked it on top of the others. Still, the words lingered in my mind. *Thrice defiant*. Sounded a little familiar.

Then it snapped into place. The Veil. *The Veil shall be sustained by her dying or undone by her living.*

Of course Rodriguez would think this was about Medra. He'd probably convinced himself the entire thing was a map. And now he and Medra had both gone off on this dwarven quest. Poor fucking Medra. Pity rose in me

so unexpectedly I had to sit down. Had I just read her death sentence? Did she know about this prophecy? Considering Rodriguez's propensity for a lack of tact, she probably did. The better question was … did Blake?

My heart sped up. I glanced at the clock on the wall: seven o'clock. They'd be long gone by now, so I had no way of telling Blake, but I wanted to do him that favor. I wanted him to stop Rodriguez and, yes, even save Medra if he could. I bit my lip … It was too late. What was that saying my mother used to quote so dismissively? *The path to ruin runs with the blood of highbloods with good intentions.* She wasn't really a proponent of empathy.

I sighed and stood up, reaching for another book—just as Dani screamed. I dropped the book and ran out into the vestibule. Dani was half out of her chair, backed up against the wall, her face paper-white. I immediately saw the reason for her terror: The doors to the corridor were blocked. A pack of highbloods were spilling into the reception area. Not just students with a grievance—these people were infected. Their skin was sallow and mottled, and their veins were dark as black ink. The smell was what really hit me hard, rotten and sickly sweet. It brought back unfortunate memories of my cell, the tortures of Viktor's lab. I shook my head to clear the recollection and gagged as Dani let out another shrill scream.

A highblood man, once handsome, now hollow-cheeked and withered, lurched forward with jerky limbs, reaching behind the desk, his nails scraping over the wood.

"Dani!" my voice rang out loudly. "My office. Move!"

Her eyes flashed to me, desperate and afraid. She was a sheep, I realized. And I was a wolf—I had to be. I felt a strange surge of pride in myself. I was a wolf. I could fucking do this.

"Move, Dani. Now," I commanded.

She stumbled toward me, nearly tripping over her own chair just as the highblood man sprawled across her desk, fingers grasping for where the dwarven girl had just been standing. Dani slipped past me with a choked sob.

"Shut it behind you," I shouted over my shoulder. "Lock it and barricade the door." I caught her eyes widening. "That's an order, Dani," I snapped.

"Yes, Headmistress!" The door slammed, and I heard the scrape of furniture from her side.

I looked at the crowd of highbloods. At least they were slow-moving. My eyes flicked across the walls to the framed portraits of the board of directors. I was outnumbered and alone. No one would be awake yet. Dani had been painfully early, clearly wanting to make a good impression. No Kage, no Lysander—what an irony that this had happened the first day they took a break. At least they might be able to take a permanent vacation from Regan-guarding now. For one irrational moment, I almost wanted to shout their names. I thought of Kage—silver fur and lethal claws. I thought of Lysander—beautiful with that strange, drifting, deadly grace. But I'd had my chance. Now it was gone.

What a shitty second first day back.

At least I could save Dani. Maybe eating me would distract them and they'd forget about her. But I could take some of them out first. I reached for my weapon of choice and as the first infected high-bloods launched themselves at me, I swung.

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CHAPTER 45

KAGE



Lysander and I moved through Bloodwing like wolves through a sleeping forest. The castle still hadn't woken up. A few servants were out and about, sweeping halls and checking lamps. But most of the students were sleeping. Not Regan, though. No, our new headmistress had apparently decided to get an early start on her day. What a hard-working girl. It was almost like she'd realized lying in bed all day wasn't going to cut it for her. Like she'd started to remember ambition could feel pretty damn good. I was proud of her, but also worried.

We'd left the Dragon Court about an hour ago after delivering the bad news. We'd watched Blake and Medra and their squad scramble into motion as they realized what had happened. We'd said our good-byes quickly and wished them luck. Then we went back to the Avari Tower to check on Regan. The Avari student we'd left supposedly guarding her door had stuttered out that she'd told him to stay put. When he'd seen our faces, he'd looked like he might piss himself.

Lysander's fist had snapped out and hit the wall. The stone had cracked. The sound echoed down the hallway, and the Avari boy's face had gone white. I eyed my consort. He hadn't spoken since we'd left the tower.

"You all right?"

He shook his head. "Don't ask that."

I knew he'd been dealing with dreams of his sister. He didn't tell me much; I only knew that she was alive and that things were bad. I also knew that if there were anything we could do for her—anything at all—Lysander wouldn't have hesitated to tell me. I would have gone with him in a heartbeat. So yeah, it must have been bad. I hadn't asked a lot of questions, but we'd comforted each other the way we always had.

We rounded the last corner leading to the headmistress's suite of offices, and I heard it. Screams in the distance. My body reacted before my mind had finished identifying the sound. Lysander and I exchanged one look. No words. Blades came out. We moved quickly. We reached the hall, and the smell of rotten blood hit hard. I held back from shifting into my wolf, even though the desire was itching beneath my skin, and there was a clean simplicity to simply ripping throats out with my teeth. But the less who knew the Avari secret, the better, and I didn't know who would be standing in that office when we got there.

We reached the doors to Regan's suite, saw the cluster of high-bloods, their movements wrong—jerky, uncoordinated. Eyes full of nothing but hunger. And there, standing in the center of it all, swinging a framed portrait of Catherine Mortis's dead father like a makeshift blade was Regan. She'd ripped the fucking frame off the wall and was using it like a hand-held decapitation tool.

An infected highblood lunged for her, mouth wide open and rotten teeth bared. Regan pivoted and slammed the edge of the portrait into the highblood's throat. His head jerked backward, and she followed through, ruthless and efficient, using the weight of the frame like an executioner's ax. The highblood's head separated from his body and splatted across the polished marble floor.

Regan's chest heaved. The purple jacket she was wearing had come undone, and blood splattered the white shirt underneath. She lifted the portrait again, her polished fingers tight around the edge of the frame. She looked dangerous, deadly, and really fucking hot. "Come on, then," she snarled, her voice low and husky. "Make my day worse. I dare you."

For a single heartbeat, I was stunned. Frozen, but not from fear. If anything, I'd never been so turned on in my life. I glanced at Lysander. His eyes were blazing with pride. He met my look, and I saw something there so hot and brutal I couldn't stand it. But it would wait. We moved forward together.

I growled, throwing myself into the fray, my body a blur of steel and fangs as I cut tendons and tore throats. Beside me, Lysander was teaching a similar lesson in violence to the feral fools who had tried to kill our mate. Regan fought with us. She didn't step back once she saw us. She moved like someone who'd already been broken once and had decided to become the blade that had hurt them. When she'd smashed the last infected in the

face with a crack of the broken picture frame that smashed their teeth out, it was over.

Silence rushed in.

Regan still held the portrait dangling from one hand. Her knuckles were white with tension. Her hair was streaked with blood and gore.

“Are you hurt?” Lysander asked, his voice rough.

She shook her head slowly. Behind her, the door to the inner office slowly creaked open, and a small timid face peeked out.

“Is it over?”

Regan sighed. “Yes, Dani. It’s over. You can come out now.”

The girl crept out, her eyes widening as she took in the sight of mangled bodies and leaking heads.

“You lied.” Lysander’s voice was low. I followed his gaze to the smear of red across Regan’s cheek. Lysander’s voice was tight. “You’re bleeding. They were infected, and you’re bleeding.”

Regan touched a hand to her cheek cautiously. “It isn’t mine.”

Lysander didn’t even blink. “I’m not taking any chances.” Before I could even get a word in, he was crossing the space between himself and Regan, lifting her into his arms. Regan made a sound—I wasn’t sure if it was shock or outrage or both or neither. But whatever it was, it was too late.

“Lysander,” I started to say. But a gust of air swept past me, and he was gone. And then they were in the corridor, and Lysander was moving with highblood speed.

Dani stared after him, clearly stunned speechless. Slowly she looked up at me.

I bent over, wiping my blade on a clean bit of feral highblood clothing, then sheathed it. “Headmistress Pansera will be taking the rest of the day off,” I said, as I straightened. I looked around the room—at the pools of black blood and the spatters of bone and other unpleasant materials that now decorated the vestibule walls. “I’ll have servants come clean all of this up.”

The girl nodded.

I cleared my throat. “You don’t have to stay, you know. You could go home, too. Take a day off.”

“I’ll stay,” she whispered. “She saved my life.”

I let my mouth curve just a little. “She’s quite an impressive woman.” I turned back to the hall. “Lock the inner doors behind you, just in case there

are more.”

But I doubted there would be. I’d already seen what Lysander had missed. This wasn’t a new wave of the plague. Those highbloods hadn’t been infected. They’d been raised.

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CHAPTER 46

REGAN



Lysander didn’t speak or put me down until we’d reached my door. Then he lowered me to the floor, just inside the threshold, as if I might break, and pushed the door shut behind him. With him on the inside.

I backed away from him, fury hot in my veins. “What the hell was that?”

Kage was an actual wolf, but Lysander was built like one. He leaned back against the door, filling it. His body wasn’t large like Kage or Blake’s; he was a lanky man—built the way a wolf was in winter. All long lines of muscle and fine bone. And clearly he’d been built for speed and endurance. He wasn’t even breathing hard. I stared at him. Some strands of his silver hair had come loose from the leather he’d tied the rest back with. They touched his cheek-bones when he moved.

I made the mistake of looking into his eyes. I’d thought of them as calm and glacial-blue. But right now, they were looking rather storm-tossed. I swallowed.

“You were bleeding,” he said simply.

I dragged the back of my wrist across my cheek, wiping at the smear of red. Then I lifted my face as proof. As if I were at my own trial. “It wasn’t mine. I told you that.” My voice sounded raspy.

Something shifted in his eyes. The stormy seas calmed, just for a moment before snapping back into place. “Show me the rest.”

I blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

Lysander’s jaw tightened. His eyes moved to my throat, then lowered. “Prove that you’re not injured. That they didn’t bite you. You could be infected.” His throat worked. “I need to know. I need to see.”

A flush of heat crawled up my neck. “You’re fucking insane. I’m not stripping for you.”

His nostrils flared. He took a step forward. I gasped and took a step back. Then he stopped, abruptly. His hands were clenched at his sides, and I realized he was holding himself back from reaching for me.

"What are you doing?" My voice was shaking. "Are you afraid of me, is that it? Are you going to put me down if I'm infected, Lysander?"

His eyes widened. "No. Not afraid of you." He inhaled and exhaled slowly. "Afraid *for* you. I just … need to know."

"Well, then, you're going to need to trust me," I snapped. "If I was infected, I'd have already slit my own throat."

His jaw clenched. "Don't even say that."

"Why not? It's true. You think I want to hurt someone? Infect someone?"

Lysander was still staring at me with an intensity that scared me. But he didn't look angry or even protective. He looked … starved. Like he'd been hungry for a very long time and had somehow convinced himself he could live on just willpower alone. Finally, a muscle in his cheek twitched. Then he nodded. "You're right. I was … out of line. I'm sorry." He looked dazed by his own apology or maybe by how close he was standing.

I felt off-balance. "It's fine." The man had just bodily picked me up and carried me halfway across the fucking school. But sure, it was fine.

"I'm going to run you a bath now."

I stared at him as he marched across my room to the bathroom. "Wh-what?" I sputtered. I couldn't help looking at the fine lines of his back under the linen shirt he wore. Then I came to my senses. "Lysander, no, I don't need a …" But he was already running the taps. I stood there, listening to the rush of water. "Fuck." My heart was still beating too fast. From the fight or from … whatever the hell this was?

I walked into the bathing chamber. He was sitting on the side of the tub but didn't look up at me as I stepped into the doorway. "Lysander," I said, trying to make my voice steady and ignoring the scent of vanilla rising from the tub. I wondered how he known it was the scent that comforted me the most. "I think you should leave now."

"No."

I stared at him. "That wasn't a request."

Lysander went still. Very slowly, he looked up at me. His hands were palm-down on his thighs. They were trembling. His eyes were still too bright; the storm hadn't passed. It was merely trapped behind glass. There was blood on his cuff. His hair had spilled further from its tie. A pale strand

fell over one eye, giving him a disheveled appearance and making him look even less controlled. I wasn't used to seeing Lysander Orphos this way—out of control, reckless, wild. "I can't leave."

"Why?" I asked, incredulous. "Lysander, what the hell is going on?"

He swallowed. Then his eyes flicked over me, like he was reassuring himself I was really all right. He looked away abruptly, like he'd caught himself doing it and knew he shouldn't. "I can't take this anymore," he said, as if to himself.

I stepped forward and before I could help myself, I'd lifted a hand to his cheek. "What can't you take?"

He grabbed my hand, holding it in place. His grip was strong. His skin was warm. I gasped. Then he let go, his eyes going right to the scar on my throat. I stepped back. "You don't own me," I said shakily.

"I don't want to own you," he said, his voice quiet.

"Then, what's going on?" I demanded. Why can't you leave, Lysander? What aren't you saying?" Guilt flashed across his face. "So there is something?" I stopped, thinking.

He was conflicted. Then I saw it—for half a second, I saw the thing he was holding back. Something worse than violence or cruelty: *want*. Desire flashed across his face, his gaze pinning me so tightly I felt it like a touch. My breath caught.

"You look good in purple." He gestured to my clothes.

I gaped at him. "You mean in your colors. Orphos colors." His head jerked. "But I'm wearing silver, too. And black," I pointed out. "Avari colors." He didn't say a word. "That doesn't bother you?" Clearly it didn't. I narrowed my eyes. "You could get inside my head, see my dreams, give me dreams. Is that … normal for someone in House Orphos? Can you do that with everyone?"

His eyes widened slightly, and I knew I had him. "No," he said simply. "Not everyone can do it."

"But you can do it to anyone?" I pushed. A pause. Then he shook his head. My heart sped up. "Only to me?"

"Only to a very few people. Three."

I stared at him. "Your sister?" He nodded slightly. "Me. And Kage?" I guessed. His lips turned up just slightly: I was right. "I can understand why your sister is one of them. But why me? Why Kage?"

"Getting cozy, are we?"

I whirled around. *Speak of the man, and so he appeared.* Sliding through the doorway like the blade he'd so effortlessly sliced up a roomful of feral highbloods with just a few minutes before.

Kage stood there like he belonged. He crossed his arms over his chest, gaze moving between me and Lysander and then to the curls of steam coming off the bath. His mouth tipped into the slightest smile, and he crossed the room without hurry, stopping directly in front of Lysander. For a moment, I stared in confusion. Then Kage slid his fingers into the pale spill of Lysander's hair, gently tipped his face up, and kissed him. It wasn't a fucking peck on the cheek either. This was intimate—full of need and familiar. They'd done this before.

Lysander made a sound in the back of his throat, and a current went through me that I didn't want to explain. He gripped the back of Kage's neck hard, deepening the kiss. I felt choked. Like all the air was disappearing from the room. I couldn't look away. This was my room, after all. My room they were kissing in. And yet … I hated that the sight of them together was doing something strange to me. A chain inside my chest seemed to be tightening and unwinding all at the same time. Watching them was like a key fitting into place. They looked … right. Beautiful in a way that was oddly infuriating—because it made me feel lonely.

Kage pulled back, breathing hard. He rested his shoulder briefly against Lysander's, then brushed his thumb over the other man's jaw, almost absentmindedly. He looked over at me, but when he spoke, it was to Lysander. "So, you've told her?"

My temper flared. "Told me what?"

Kage's smile returned, faint as a secret. "Oh. One step at a time, then."

"One step at a …" I jabbed my finger at them. "You do not get to stroll into my room, kiss each other like that, and then say *one step at a time*."

Kage lifted his brows, then inclined his head toward the hot bath. "You planning to take it?"

I glared at him. "With both of you in my room? I sure as hell am not."

Lysander flinched slightly. "I ran it."

Kage shrugged. "Fair." He looked at the tub again. "Well, it's hot. For now. If you're not going to use the water …"

My eyes narrowed. "Oh, don't you dare."

But it was too late. Kage already pulled his shirt over his head. I tried not to react to the sight of his body, all hard lines and promises of power made

flesh. Broad shoulders, corded arms, a chest you could … I swallowed.

He caught me looking, and his smile sharpened, turning wolfish. “What? You want us to waste it?”

I threw up my hands. “You are unbelievable.”

Kage winked. “I think you knew that the first night on the cliff.”

Lysander’s head snapped to the other man. “Kage,” he said, warningly.

Kage smirked; the Avari wasn’t a smirker. He’d never fucking smirked at me before. I knew that because I’d have remembered the way that smirk made me feel, the way something hot spread straight off that smirking mouth of his and went straight into my fucking veins.

“Fine,” I bit out. “Go ahead and use the bath. Since we’ve all apparently decided this is a common room.”

Kage didn’t do modesty. Maybe it was the wolf in him. I supposed he’d had to get over it a long time ago. He shrugged off his trousers, not even bothering to turn his back. My cheeks felt hot. “Blood-fucking-dammit,” I muttered under my breath as he finally turned around and climbed into the bath. He lowered himself in, water climbing up over his ribs and beading across his skin. Then he leaned back, arms draped over the edges, looking completely at ease.

“You can stop bracing for another wave of the plague,” Kage stated.

Lysander’s head snapped up. “How do you know that?”

“Because the ones back in the office weren’t just infected.”

“They were,” I protested, remembering the black veins, the mottled skin.

“They were infected, but not recently. They’d been raised.”

A chill went through me. “What?”

“Necromancy,” Lysander said, fury filling his voice.

Kage nodded briefly. “Someone sent them.”

Lysander’s jaw flexed, his hands curled into fists, and for a moment I worried about my bathroom walls. Kage watched him. “You’d have figured it out, too. If you’d stuck around.”

Lysander’s eyes flashed partly with anger, but I caught amusement there, too. “I stuck around long enough to keep her alive.”

Kage grinned. “I’m not arguing with the results.”

Lysander exhaled. “Did you find who did it?”

“Of course—House Mortis, obviously. Found a Fourth Year lurking not far off. Stench of magic all over him.”

“What did you do with him?” I demanded. “I want to see him.”

Kage and Lysander exchanged a look. “I already handled it,” Kage said slowly.

I shook my head. “Right.” I pointed at Lysander. “He can get inside my dreams. Apparently that’s rare.”

Lysander held very still. Kage looked at me, saying nothing.

“Meanwhile, you … you feel like a pull.”

“You feel a pull?” Kage’s expression was blameless.

“Fuck you,” I snapped. I closed my eyes. “Yes, I feel a pull. What did you do to me?”

“We made a vow,” Kage said carefully. “Viktor is no longer your archon, is he?”

I shook my head, wary. “No.” Thank the fucking Bloodmaiden for that.

“You lied to me,” I accused him. “You told me we weren’t mates.”

“I didn’t say that. Not exactly. Besides, you don’t want the truth.”

I stared at him, stunned. “Maybe I don’t want it, but I deserve it. What the fuck is happening to me?”

“To you?” Lysander lifted his hands, pushing his hair back off his face. “It’s not just happening to you, Regan.”

“Your bond with Viktor dissolved when we made the Blood Vow,” Kage said quietly.

I nodded, trying to get a hold of myself. “All right.”

“Lysander and I were already consorts,” Kage went on. “We go back … a long time.”

I looked back and forth between them. That tracked. “All right,” I said again, not knowing what else to say. “So I’m the intruder here.” I took an unsteady step back. “Maybe I should go.”

“This is your room,” Kage pointed out, just as Lysander snapped, “You’re not going anywhere.”

Lysander cleared his throat. “The dreams. We’re connected. Not just you and me, all three of us.” He glanced at Kage. “When Kage made that vow …”

“Oh, shit,” I breathed. The pieces were falling into place now.

“We’re a triad, Regan. You’re our archon,” Kage said, from the bath.

I stared at them, too stunned to speak. Finally, “That’s not possible,” I said. “I’m House Drakharrow. Is that even possible? I mean …” I shook my head.

“It’s rare, but not impossible,” Lysander said quietly. “When Kage made the vow, he realized what had happened.”

“He made a mistake, you mean,” I said, my voice trembling.

“No.” Kage’s voice was sharp. “It wasn’t a mistake. I told you, when a wolf finds his mate, he knows. I felt something for you on that cliff, right from the start. The vow wasn’t a mistake. It was destiny.”

“Or more like possession,” Lysander muttered.

“*Destiny?*” I repeated. “We’re each in different houses. We have nothing in common.”

Lysander shook his head. “When we came for you, do you remember what I did?”

I stared at him. “You held me in midair.”

He nodded. “You think I can do that with just anyone? For anyone? It’s the same as with the dreams.” He looked tired, as if trying to convince me was exhausting him. To be fair, it had already been a long morning.

“I didn’t agree to this,” I whispered. “And you two, you were … already together?”

Kage nodded. “That doesn’t mean we don’t want you.” For a second, he let it drop—that shield he’d had up for weeks. The shield that had been hiding the desire he felt when he looked at me. Now he lowered the wall, and I felt it. I gasped as Kage’s eyes held mine. Lysander, I realized, was on his feet. He’d already taken a step toward me.

I held up my hand. “Stop. Don’t come any closer.” He paused. “You don’t get to do this,” I said, my voice shaking. “You don’t get to touch me. I am not your fucking archon.”

“You are,” Lysander said, his voice soft. “We’re a triad. And this bond, we couldn’t break it even if we tried. I’m sorry—you possess us. We’re yours, even if you don’t want us.”

Kage looked at me, his face masking once again. “We know you didn’t choose this. That you don’t want it.”

“I …” I took a deep breath. “I don’t want anyone. I just want to be alone.” I looked at Lysander. “Tell me how this works.”

“We’re something rare. They used to call us a *power triad*, a triad formed from a union of three houses.” He smiled slightly. “There were once *power quartets*. But apparently they were even more rare.”

“And you know this how? Because you read it in some book?”

Lysander’s eyes flicked to Kage. “It’s a secret of my house. It’s why Orphos forms triads the way we do. We’re always hoping it will happen. But … I never expected this.” He met my eyes then. “We never expected you. But fuck, Regan, do we want you.”

It was all too much. I started to back away. “I need—”

“You need to be alone,” Lysander said quietly. “We understand. We will never push you. But we will protect you.”

“Forever,” Kage said from the tub. His gaze was dark as he looked at me. “Don’t ask us to stop, because we fucking can’t. You have to give us that much.”

“I can’t breathe,” I whispered. My voice was thin. “I need to lie down.” Neither of them moved to stop me. I turned on my heel, going back into the bedroom, shutting the door behind me.

Outside, my hands shook as I undid buttons and tugged my clothes off. The beautiful outfit I’d chosen with such care now reeked of rotten blood. I found a basin, filled it with water, and scrubbed a cloth over my dirty skin until it stung. I inspected my body in the mirror over the dresser. No bites, no breaks. Just exhaustion. I pulled on a fresh robe, wrapping the soft fabric around me, and sank into bed, staring up at the canopy. The black silk was embossed with silver stars. From inside the bathing chamber, I could hear lowered male voices. I couldn’t make out any of the words.

I closed my eyes. Tried to breathe. It was a new day, but my body no longer cared. I was so tired. But I couldn’t rest. Eventually I heard the bathwater drain. Then, footsteps. The door opened.

When I turned my head, both men stood there. Clean, with wet hair. Both had white towels wrapped around their waists. Kage looked a little sheepish, like the idea of covering up had been an afterthought.

Lysander looked at me carefully. “We’ll go now. But if you need us, one of us will be near. Always.”

I swallowed. “I’m so tired.” I hated how small my voice sounded. “But I can’t sleep.”

Kage’s expression softened first. Lysander’s eyes moved over my face, concern filling his eyes, like he was checking for something he’d missed. They exchanged a look. “We can lie on the floor,” Kage suggested, his voice hesitant.

My pulse jumped.

“We won’t touch you,” Lysander promised. His voice was rougher than it should have been.

The bed I was lying in was massive. I exhaled slowly. “Lie next to me. But … not too close.”

Kage’s mouth twitched. “Yes, Headmistress.”

Lysander didn’t tease. He only nodded solemnly, like he was making a vow. The two men moved to each side of my bed. Kage dropped his towel first, then slid under the blankets to my right so quickly it was as if he was worried I’d change my mind. The mattress sank with his weight, and I gave a little gasp, nearly rolling toward him. Lysander was more hesitant. He slid into the bed slowly on my left.

And then there I was. Trapped between them. What the fuck had I done? I could feel their heat. They didn’t move, didn’t touch me. Just lay there. I closed my eyes. My breathing gradually slowed down.

The room was quiet. I could hear the waves.

“Rest, Regan,” Lysander whispered. “Sleep.”

His voice was so gentle. So tender. Before I could even reply, my eyelids became too heavy to move. There came a wonderful feeling of being safe. Sleep slipped over me.

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Book 3
Below

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CHAPTER 47

MEDRA



The gate we passed through reminded me of home. Not the shape of it, this one had been clearly of dwarven making, but the concept was the same. On the other side, we hadn't been greeted with a triumphant parade—or any signs of civilization at all. We'd bypassed all dwarven cities, all towns. We were off on a different road.

We'd walked all day before finally stopping to set up camp. There was no true day or night underground, and we were learning quickly how disorienting that could be. It was never truly dark. Instead, the sky constantly glowed. Far above was a vast sky of bioluminescence, so high above I couldn't make out what it was made from exactly. Plants? Fungi? Whatever it was, it was beautiful, all pale blues and soft greens with threads of purple woven in. It pulsed in slow waves, like a living thing, and glittered with tiny points of light. Around us, the cavern walls spread out like a huge cathedral. It reminded me of the Black Keep in some ways, except with a forest inside of it. Forest life covered the ground beneath our feet—low ferns that glowed faintly, huge mushrooms as high as my calf, and tall trees so pale their trunks looked more like bone than wood. But the water surprised me the most. We'd followed an underground river for miles and even passed small lakes. Now in the cavern we'd chosen to make camp, a narrow stream split through the undergrowth. The sound of the water flowing was comforting. A little like the sea back at Bloodwing.

Our camp lay on a shelf of stone, raised above the damper ground below. Tents had been raised, bedrolls unfolded. We still had the dwarven attendants with us, but Zaira had said we'd be leaving them behind soon. They'd return to their homes in one of the cities without us. I supposed

they'd be taking word back to the high council about what had happened to Lord Sharma. The best laid plans and all that …

Blake sat on a fallen root, one boot propped up as he stared into the fire. He looked tired. I knew he'd learned to leash the dragon that lived under his skin. I knew they were now forever one and the same. But I still worried about him. Hawl sat on a rock opposite Blake. The bear whittled something with a knife that looked too small for their paws. I watched it take shape until it formed a ball. Fascinated, I watched them hold the ball in one paw, then lift it into the air and toss it. There was an immediate response from Neville. The fluffin rushed forward, yapping with hysterical eagerness. He dove to where the ball had landed, yapped louder as the ball rolled off the ledge of rock and into the foliage below, and then plunged down to fetch it, barking madly the entire time.

Hawl's laugh boomed out across the cavern. "So the little pup does play fetch."

Blake's eyebrows went up. "You know, I never thought to give the little guy a ball."

"A missed opportunity, to be sure," Hawl rumbled, as Neville scampered back up onto the ledge, the wooden ball gripped firmly in his mouth. Hawl reached for the ball, but Neville shied away. "Oh, it's like that now, is it, little one? Come, you must give me the ball," Hawl gently encouraged. "Or I cannot throw it again, and we cannot play."

Neville dropped the ball, which looked rather wet and slobbery. Hawl reached for it. Neville grabbed it before Hawl could pick it up and raced away.

Visha laughed from where she was lounging against a tied-up bedroll just inside the opening of her tent. "I think Neville needs to learn the finer points of fetch." Then her eyes narrowed. "What do you think you're doing?" She'd spoken to Kazmyn. He'd moved lazily toward Visha's tent with his backpack in hand.

"I'm unpacking," he said. "We're sharing a tent."

"We're not fucking sharing a tent. Go and share with your sister. Or Rodriguez," Visha snapped.

Kazmyn raised a brow. "But you are a highblood."

Visha rolled her eyes. "Excellent observation. Yes, what of it?"

"And you do require blood to survive?" Kazmyn pointed out.

Visha's face fell. "Fucking shit."

“Did you bring any thralls with you?” Kazmyn inquired politely. He pretended to look around. “Or perhaps you just assumed that one of the dwarven attendants would acquiesce to your needs?”

Visha’s face flushed red. “Of course not.”

“Well, in that case, it seems to me you need a volunteer.”

Blake was cracking up. “Visha, did you seriously not think of this?”

“Shut the fuck up,” she snapped. “No, I fucking did not. There were more important things to think of.” She glanced over to where Rodriguez had set up his tent. He was inside it now with Sankara.

The tent wasn’t moving so I assumed they were sleeping or cuddling. I didn’t really need to know. But clearly Visha had miscalculated somehow.

“Fuck,” she muttered.

There was a wicked gleam in Kazmyn’s eyes. “I’ve always wondered what a highblood bite would feel like. I’ve heard the feel of fangs can be … tantalizing.” He glanced at me with frank curiosity, and I felt myself blushing.

Blake snapped his fingers. “Hey! Kazmyn, eyes over here. On me, not her. You don’t look at her and think *tantalizing*, got it? Not ever.”

Kazmyn grinned. “Yes, O Highblood Master.” He looked down at Visha. “You see? I live to serve.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Blake looked disgusted. “I see what you mean now, Vish. He’s quite a prick.”

Visha groaned. “I swear to you, I will bite anyone else, Kazmyn.” She looked around the camp with an agonized expression, as Blake broke into cackles of laughter again. I bit my lip, following her gaze.

“Do not even think about it,” Zaira said imperiously, from where she stood, leafing through a book on the other side of the camp. “You may feed from one of the attendants this evening. They know your predilections, and I warned them this might come up.”

“Fucking Bloodmaiden,” Visha muttered. “This is humiliating.” There was still an underlying flush to her golden-brown face. She stood up and walked over to Blake, then punched him in the arm, hard.

“Ouch. What the fuck was that for?” he complained.

“For laughing,” she declared.

I smothered a laugh of my own.

“However, the attendants will be returning to Thrazdummar when we reach the entrance to the vault,” Zaira continued. “And then you will need

to use Kazmyn."

Visha sputtered. "Absolutely not."

"Then, you will starve." Zaira eyed her coldly. "Are you saying my brother's blood is not good enough for you?"

"Probably because I'm half-dwarven." Kazmyn gave a dramatic sigh.

Visha's eyes widened. "What the fuck? Of course not, I don't give a shit about that."

"Well I don't see any other volunteers," Zaira said, waving a hand. "You're making quite a fuss when Kazmyn is willing." She eyed her brother with distaste. "Very undwarf-like."

"How is it undwarf-like?" Blake asked curiously.

"Below the surface, dwarves do not worship highbloods as you are used to above," Zaira said coldly. "Your disgusting displays of thrallweave do not move us to simply offer up our necks, as you may recall."

"I offer mine willingly," Kazmyn piped up cheerfully. "Can't wait. Honestly." He flashed a grin at Visha. "But let's discuss feeding schedules later. In our tent."

Visha put her head in her hands and moaned.

"In the meantime," Kazmyn went on, "I think we have something more important to do."

"Yes, like discuss where exactly we're going," Blake said with evident relief.

Kazmyn waved a hand dismissively. "Not that. Squad names. I vote for Squad Bloodshield." He smiled endearingly at his sister. "Or maybe Stone Keeper Squad?"

"Absolutely not," Blake and Zaira both snapped at the same time. Then glared at one another.

"Obviously we're Squad Drakharrow," Blake declared.

I raised a brow. "Oh, it's obvious, is it?"

He frowned. "Of course. You're from Drakharrow. I'm from Drakharrow Visha's from Drakharrow. We have a majority. Majority wins."

"Medra is actually in House Avari," Visha pointed out, looking thrilled to one-up Blake. "And Sankara is in Orphos."

"And what about Rodriguez?" I asked. "He's kind of random."

"He's blightborn. He doesn't count." Blake flushed. "Oh, shit. I didn't mean that. I just meant he doesn't have a house."

“Oh, good one, Drakharrow,” Visha laughed. “You’re going to pay for that one later. Isn’t he, Medra?”

I winked at her.

“The little pup and I are unaffiliated,” Hawl rumbled, reminding us they were there. They were whittling something again. It looked like another ball.

“Did you hear that, highblood? The giant warrior bear and the fluffin are not affiliated with your stupid attempts to colonize us all under your banner,” Zaira said icily. “Nor are Kazmyn and I. Despite his disgusting interest in your fangs.”

“I’m interested. I’m very interested, Zaira. I think we need this. For morale.” He flashed an obsequious grin at her.

She eyed him coldly. “You know that doesn’t work on me. I don’t find you charming.”

“Neither do I,” Visha announced. “I’d just like to make that clear. Even if I do have to bite him. There will be nothing *tantalizing* about it.”

“Oh, so you’re going to make it hurt, then?” If anything, Kazmyn looked even more interested.

I choked.

“Now, look,” he went on. “We’re a squad. We have a goal. We need a name.”

“We have a name,” Zaira said arrogantly. “We are the Ember-watch.”

“Two of you are Emberwatch, and one of you is with the enemy now,” Kazmyn pointed out. “So I’m not sure that’s a good one.”

“Let me guess, young one. Something intimidating? Something that will strike terror into the hearts of your enemies?” said Magda.

Professor Stonefist had been sitting silently against a boulder, her eyes half-closed, looking unbothered by the lively discussion taking place around her. Now her eyes were open. Her beard had little flecks of luminous dust caught in it.

Kazmyn tilted his head. “Not necessarily.”

I snapped my fingers. “Oh my god. Theo. That’s who he reminds me of.”

Visha glared at me. “A knockoff version, perhaps.”

Blake was laughing again.

Kazmyn looked between the three of us. “Theo?”

“My cousin,” Blake managed to say.

“Theo is a million times better than him,” Visha muttered.

“I’m honored.” Kazmyn gave a faux bow, and I snorted. “Now, back to the name.”

“The squad does not require a name,” Zaira said sharply. “It requires discipline. This is disrespectful. We are not on a tavern crawl.”

“If only,” Visha and Kazmyn both said at the same time.

Blake and I looked at one another. “Perfect match,” he mouthed to me.

I stood up and moved to sit next to him. “She’ll have killed him by the morrow,” I whispered in his ear.

Zaira scowled. “What are you two whispering about?”

“Nothing,” we both said in unison.

“Squad names,” I added hastily.

“Well, do share with the class,” Visha said, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

“What about Fang Fam?” Kazmyn said innocently.

“You are humiliating me, our kingdom, and all of dwarven culture right now, Kazmyn,” Zaira moaned, covering her face.

“Fluffin Squad,” Hawl boomed out.

I looked at Blake.

“That’s not half-bad,” he muttered.

“We will accept Fluffin Squad,” I announced.

“I like it, too,” Visha admitted.

Neville’s ears must have been burning. He crept back into the circle, tongue lolling and tail wagging.

Blake reached down to scratch behind the fluffin’s ears. “You like that, Nev?”

Kazmyn snapped his fingers. “I’ve got it. The Purr Pack.”

“I like that less,” Hawl boomed. “But I will accept it.”

“The Paw-Sworn?” Kazmyn suggested. “Soft-Paw Patrol?”

I laughed. “I think we should stick with the *Fluffin Squad* for simplicity’s sake. But you and Rodriguez should definitely talk.”

Kazmyn perked up. “Oh, really?”

“Yes, he has a thing for acronyms,” Visha groaned. “I had to hear about it. Extensively.”

Kazmyn eyed her. “So, you and the professor … ?” He looked over at the tent that held Sankara and Rodriguez. “Like, both of them … or … ?”

“Or, none of your fucking business,” Visha snapped.

Kazmyn held up his hands. “Fluffin Squad it is.”

Zaira clenched her jaw. “You are all children.”

Blake snorted. “I think we just need to be able to laugh about something.”

“Yes. That reminds me, Zaira,” I said calmly. “Why did we need to bring Neville?”

Zaira was quiet. “We did not force the fluffin to come. He followed you.”

“But we need him, don’t we?” I prodded. “I think it’s time we had a chat.”

“Timing’s good,” Kazmyn said. “Looks like your professors are finished napping.”

Rodriguez and Sankara were emerging from their tent. I honestly couldn’t tell if Rodriguez’s hair was messier than it was when he went in, but he was definitely blushing.

“I was just telling our leading Emberwatch expert here,” I told Rodriguez, “that we all need to have a frank discussion about our plan now that we’re down here.”

Rodriguez frowned—as I’d known he would. “I wouldn’t say Zaira is the only Emberwatch expert.”

Visha rolled her eyes. “This should be good.”

I glanced at Blake. He nodded. “Zaira,” I said, “I think now might be a good time to tell you that Blake and I aren’t the idiots you seem to think we are.”

“Are you implying I’m an idiot?” Visha asked frostily.

“No,” I said quickly. “That’s not what I meant.” I looked at Blake helplessly.

He stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Zaira, it’s time to come clean.”

“I am clean,” the First Stone Keeper said, narrowing her eyes. “Dwarves believe in bathing. Don’t highbloods?”

The back of Blake’s neck flushed. “Of course!”

Magda lumbered to her feet. “Zaira, enough with the bullshit. They know.”

Zaira looked at her. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nyxaris came to us before he left to find Florence,” I said. “I mean, he came to Blake. They spoke.” We’d decided not to share with everyone the fact that Nyxaris was a highblood man and a dragon.

Blake cleared his throat. “Yes, mind to mind. You know, like dragons do.”

Zaira was looking at us suspiciously. “And?”

I was starting to get annoyed. “Nyxaris told us the dwarves were coming.”

“How would he know this?” Zaira’s head snapped to Magda. The professor pointed to the fluffin. Zaira gave a disbelieving laugh. “The fluffin told the dragon?”

“They can communicate,” Blake said quietly. “Neville told Nyxaris enough, I guess. Nyxaris sent us to see Magda. We knew about your delegation. We knew about the eggs before you told us.”

Zaira glared at Professor Stonefist. “You betrayed your people.”

Magda crossed her arms. “My people? I served, you little whelp. Need I remind you? Everything I do is for my people.” She glanced at Blake and me. “But I do have some loyalty toward the students I teach, as well.”

“Divided loyalty, it seems to me,” Zaira huffed.

“Stop trying to change the subject,” I said. “Nyxaris wants us to protect those eggs, so how are we going to get to them? And how are we going to do it before Mortis does?”

Nyxaris had known Neville had visited the dwarves. He hadn’t said how, and as the fluffin couldn’t talk, it was still a mystery to me. Nyxaris had also known I couldn’t ride him, and I couldn’t ride Blake—not then. So, he’d made us swear that we would get to the eggs and protect them. It was personal for Nyxaris. The eggs weren’t his, but they belonged to Molindra and Alabryss. I sensed the dragon believed he owed both of them a debt.

But it was more than that. If the eggs fell into Viktor Drakhar-row’s hands, the Veil would fall. Viktor would gain unspeakable power. And then Florence’s rescue would be meaningless. Or, worse, impossible.

“We want to know about the keys, Zaira,” I continued. “We want to know *everything*.”

There was quiet. Zaira still looked furious, but now I saw resignation in her expression.

“I told you to tell them from the start,” Kazmyn said softly, kicking at a loose rock.

“Shut up,” Zaira snapped. She rubbed her temples. “Very well.” She looked around at all of us. “The eggs are secure in the inner core of the

vault. There are layers we must pass through. Wards created by the dragons and dwarves. Each ward is unlocked with a key."

"What are the keys?"

"I am one," she said, tossing her head. "As First Stone Keeper and *head* of the Emberwatch, now that Lord Sharma is … missing."

Rodriguez muttered something under his breath.

"*Missing* is one way to put it. A rather charitable one," Sankara spoke up. "He'll have told House Mortis everything, won't he?"

"Not necessarily." But Zaira looked uncertain.

"They'll torture him," Blake said quietly.

Zaira bit her lip. "He is dwarven. He will not yield."

"They don't need him to yield. They have his blood," I said bluntly.

Zaira looked uncomfortable. "Perhaps."

"So that's one of the keys?" Visha asked.

Zaira nodded slowly. "The blood of the First Stone Keeper or a lord of the high council may open the wards."

Blake sat back down beside me. His eyes were narrowed. "What aren't you telling us?'

"We did not expect your revolting highblood necromancer house to take Lord Sharma," Zaira snapped. "Yes, they are ahead of us. Yes, they have his blood. And—"

"And that's bad, I take it," Rodriguez said dryly.

Zaira took a deep breath. "Yes. They will not have Lord Sharma's consent. They will attempt to use his blood. They have this … blood magician with them."

"Vane," Blake supplied. "Professor Alastor Vane. Traitor to his house."

"Vane, yes. The wards may unlock, but they may challenge those trying to enter."

I recalled the gates at Viktor's abandoned storage hold, how Theo had to reason with the wards. I looked at Zaira. "Challenge the Mortis squad? Or challenge us?"

"*Fluffin Squad*," Kazmyn reminded me. I ignored him.

"I am not sure," Zaira admitted. "We will find out soon enough."

"And then there's the Bonewood route from the north," I pointed out. "Marcus or Catherine or both will be coming."

Zaira shrugged. "I am not concerned about that. The northern route is said to be shorter, yes. But it will be impassable. No one can make it

through.” She squared her shoulders. “Especially if they are not dwarven.”

Blake glanced at me, and I shrugged. We had to hope she was right.

“Time and distance aren’t quite the same now that we’re past the gate,” Kazmyn volunteered.

“Nor are day or night,” Hawl rumbled.

“What aren’t you telling us about the northern route?” Blake said suddenly. “There’s more to it than you’re saying.”

Zaira glowered.

“Tell us,” I demanded.

“There is a … fail-safe,” Zaira revealed begrudgingly.

“What the hell does that mean?” asked Visha.

“The vault may be sealed from the other side. If your brother and this necromancer woman do make it through the north gate and if they figure out how to use the fail-safe, it would lock us out from entering the south gate. It’s highly unlikely to happen, though,” Zaira stressed.

I snorted. “We didn’t think there would be another squad, and look how well that’s turned out.”

Zaira looked annoyed.

“Well? If?” Visha prodded.

“*If* they use the fail-safe, then everyone coming through the southern route will die,” Zaira confessed.

Silence from our whole group. Then Hawl stood up. “I’m going to bed.”

“The keys, Zaira,” Blake reminded everyone.

Hawl sat back down.

“Yes, yes,” Zaira huffed. “The keys are obvious. Dragon’s blood. My blood.” She looked at Neville. “And when we arrive, the fluffin must access the eggs.”

“What if the fluffin doesn’t want to?” I asked cautiously.

“No one else may touch them,” she declared. “If anyone but the fluffin does, the eggs will harden, and they will die.”

“Well, that’s sad,” Visha remarked.

“Sad but kind of a relief,” Rodriguez admitted. “Mortis doesn’t have a fluffin—even if they get to the vault first, the eggs will be unusable. Viktor loses.”

“Now I am going to bed,” Hawl announced.

“Good night, Hawl,” we all chimed.

It wasn’t a bad idea, I thought, under the circumstances. We could argue with Zaira more in the morning. I leaned back against Blake, suddenly exhausted. Blake kissed the top of my head softly. “Who knows what else she’s not telling us,” he murmured.

I fell asleep still wondering.

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CHAPTER 48

MEDRA



My legs were starting to feel like they belonged to someone else. We'd been walking all day through the web of forest-filled, cathedral-sized chambers connected by narrow rock corridors. At first we'd made conversation to pass the time. Pointed out interesting sights. My favorite was the waterfall that vanished into a dark crack into nowhere.

Now hours later, even Kazmyn had stopped yapping. There was no evening here, no sun to rely on. But the pack on my back felt like it had dug lines into my shoulders, and my feet throbbed. I was staring mindlessly ahead as I walked when Hawl's voice rumbled from behind me.

"I am hungry."

Rodriguez was in front of me. He didn't even turn around to reply. "Yes, well, we all are."

"We should stop. I will make a stew."

Walking just beside me, Blake made a small, choked sound. I glanced over at him, a smile already on my lips. "Blake?" I thought he'd been startled by the mention of stew, but then I realized his face had gone strangely pale. He coughed once, then again, hard. His hand went to his throat.

I looked around. It wasn't just him. Visha had stopped walking and was bent over with her hands on her thighs. Kazmyn was beside her looking concerned. Ahead of me, Rodriguez was wheezing as if he'd swallowed smoke. I turned around. Behind Hawl, Sankara, and Magda had stopped, too. My lungs were starting to tighten, as if the air in the cavern was squeezing me from the inside. Blake was still coughing.

I looked around us, wildly, trying to understand what was going on. Behind us I could see Zaira doing the same. We were still in the forest, but

something had changed. A haze rose from the undergrowth around our feet. Tiny particles suspended in the air coming from the plants. Spores.

I met Zaira's eyes. "What's going on? What's happening?"

"We must have reached the first ward." For the first time, she looked almost afraid. "The forest … it's reacting. We've triggered the ward."

"How do we get through it?" I demanded. Blake coughed, harder this time. He grabbed for my arm. Fear pricked at me. "Zaira! How do we stop this?"

The Stone Keeper was looking around desperately. "Find the runestone. There should be one here somewhere. Look for dwarven stone."

"Everyone, fan out!" I barked, forcing my voice to cut through the sounds of wheezing and coughing. "Look for a big stone!"

Sankara and Magda were already moving, spreading out in opposite directions. Sankara was surprisingly agile for such a large man. Visha, still coughing, walked into the foliage, a dagger already in her hand. Kazmyn followed a few feet behind. For once, she wasn't complaining about his presence. Near me, Hawl dropped to one knee.

"Hawl!" I moved forward to touch the bear's shoulder, then realized what they were doing. They scooped Neville up and tucked the fluffin's face against their fur. One huge paw covered Neville's head gently, shielding the fluffin's face from the haze of spores. "Good idea," I rasped as a cough racked my body.

I swept my gaze out across the forest floor, trying to ignore the fact my vision was starting to blur. Everything seemed to be glowing. The forest that had been so beautiful and enchanting only moments before now looked murderous.

"Here!" It was Kazmyn. He stood near the base of a pale tree trunk. Half-buried beneath glowing ferns was a ring of stones.

Zaira was already running over. I followed, pulling Blake by the hand behind me. Deep runes were cut into six square stone faces. "Which one?" I demanded.

Rodriguez stumbled up behind us, his eyes streaming. "Hurry," he gasped. "Visha …"

Kazmyn's eyes leaped past Rodriguez to where Visha was bent over in a patch of tall ferns and grass, her eyes closed, swaying.

"Vish!" Blake choked. But Kazmyn was already moving toward her. He staggered as a cough tore through him, then reached her side and lifted her

up into his arms before she could topple.

"Zaira!" I gasped. "Do you know what to do or not?"

The Stone Keeper had dropped to her knees in front of the ring of stones. Her hands shook as she brushed aside the glowing ferns. Jaw clenched, she scanned the rune faces. Her fingers hovered over one stone, hesitated, then moved to another.

I met Blake's eyes. Not reassuring.

"This one!" I looked down to see Zaira pulling out a small knife. She sliced her palm, letting blood well up, then dribbling the drops onto one of the stones. For a moment nothing happened, and I thought we were well and truly fucked. Then the rune lit up, and the forest responded instantly. As quickly as someone could close a door or blow out a candle, the spores stopped rising around us, and the cavern air began to clear.

I sucked in a deep breath. Around me, everyone else was doing the same thing.

"Visha," Blake snapped, striding over to where Kazmyn was still holding the highblood girl in his arms. "Are you all right?"

Her violet eyes snapped open. She looked down, then shoved hard against Kazmyn's chest. "I'm fine. Put me down. I was just …"

Kazmyn set her on the ground and grinned. "You're welcome." He lowered his voice, but we could still all hear him when he said, "Looking forward to tonight, milady."

We had separated from the dwarven attendants that morning, so Visha no longer had a choice for feeding; she looked murderous. Visha started stomping off through the forest—just as the ground trembled.

A deep grinding sound came through the opening of the tunnel that branched ahead of us, like stone scraping against stone.

"What the hell was that?" Rodriguez demanded, looking back at Zaira. "Stone Keeper, care to offer up some expertise?"

"Oh shit," Blake breathed. "Look."

Two immense golems stepped out of the dark. Chiseled from dark gray stone and steel, the dwarven constructs were each twice as high as Hawl and at least three times as wide.

"Oh, come on," Rodriguez whispered from nearby. His face was pale.

"You're an academic, not a warrior," Sankara told him, putting a hand on the other man's shoulder. "Hang back." The combat instructor's battle-ax

was already out. He grinned over at Blake and me. “Truth be told, I’ve always wanted to fight one of these.” He rushed forward with a bellow.

Hawl was already leading the vanguard. The bear surged ahead of us all, their dwarven weapon swinging, catching the first golem on its forearm. Magda and Kazmyn looped around the golems from each side, knives out as they started to dart in and out like shadows.

“What the fuck is going on, Zaira?” I asked bluntly. “You turned the ward off.”

“The ward is off. The vault shouldn’t have summoned them. Not unless …” Her eyes snapped down to the runestones.

“House Mortis came this way,” I said slowly. “They would have used Sharma’s blood.”

Zaira pursed her lips. “Unwillingly given.”

“That doesn’t seem to matter much to the vault,” I snapped. “So, what? They set off some kind of alarm?”

“Yes. The vault must sense when a key is stolen instead of offered willingly. It allowed them through but punished them.”

“And now it’s punishing us,” I said grimly.

“Attack the heart-stone!” Kazmyn shouted in the distance. I glanced over at the fighters. They were holding their own. They even looked like they might be having fun.

“The challenges will be worse as we pass through each ward,” Zaira murmured. “More intense. More dangerous.”

“More dangerous than poisonous air?”

She was still crouched by the runestones. “Sharma’s blood may open the wards, but each one will demand more of him.”

“What does that mean?” Rodriguez asked, coming up beside us.

The Stone Keeper’s face was bleak as she stood up. She held something gingerly—a severed hand dangled from her grasp. Broad-palmed, brown-skinned, with a signet ring gleaming on one finger.

“Shit,” I breathed.

Zaira’s voice trembled. “Each ward will require a higher price.”

Whatever Mortis had done to get ahead, they weren’t the ones paying the price—Lord Sharma was. We were, too. And I couldn’t help but wonder just how high that price was going to be by the time we reached the last of the wards.

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CHAPTER 49

BLAKE



The path had turned mean. My calves ached as we hiked up a mountain of narrow ledges carved into stone. The golems had been a fun diversion; Visha had taken one out with a bow, Kazmyn had knocked the other's heart-stone out with a thrown dagger. I was pretty sure Hawl was still sulking over not being able to count a kill. They seemed to be not-so-secretly hoping we'd run into more golems.

The dwarves, I had decided, were a truly impressive people—and also insane. For instance, the path we were on right now had clearly been created by someone with no concept of gravity. We moved around a bend and came out on the edge of a gorge. I stopped so fast, Medra walked into my back. I slipped my pack off to rub my shoulders, and she wrapped her arms around my waist, leaning her forehead against my back with a sigh. Ahead of us, a chasm split through the cavern. A waterfall thundered down the far side in a spray of white, crashing down into churning waters far below. A mist rose up from the gorge, wetting my face and hair.

Stretched out across the gorge, swaying in the breeze, was a long rope bridge. "Look," Medra whispered. There were people on the far side of the bridge: House Mortis. About fifteen of them were gathered there. On the plus side, we were obviously catching up. On the downside, there were more of them than us.

My eyes scanned the pack of red and white. No sign of Dinesh Sharma, which meant there must be more of them and they'd already taken him ahead, somewhere out of sight. My gaze landed on Professor Alastor Vane. The tall, thin man stood slightly apart from the others, like a raven among lions. Even now, his mouth was pressed in a line of disapproval; apparently, the grass wasn't always greener on the other side.

I kept scanning. Nearby Vane stood Larissa Diamantis—she'd been one of Regan's friends. Gretchen Cameron crouched next to her, going through a heavy pack. I smirked; the scar on her cheek was fading, but I could still see it even from here. A little lesson Pendragon had taught her the year she'd arrived.

A figure stepped forward and my eyes narrowed: Silvio Santos. Golden skin. Brown eyes that looked warm until you realized how much cruelty lurked there. Square jaw, clean-shaven. Sure, he was a pretty boy—a pretty boy I'd enjoy carving open soon.

He saw me. His face lit up with delight.

Visha was ahead of me. I shot her a meaningful look, then stepped carefully past her to the front of the line, carefully tugging Pendragon along with me.

Santos's laugh cut across the roar of the waterfall. "Well, well, well," he called across the gorge. "Blake Drakharrow. Didn't expect to see you and your little squad of losers turning up so soon."

My heart rate spiked, but I kept my face neutral. The asshole had touched Pendragon, shoved her down onto her knees. I could still remember the way he'd looked at her. The way he'd smiled when I'd told him he'd lose the hand he'd touched her with. I'd already decided Santos would be losing a lot more than a hand.

He waved both his hands in the air and grinned. "Hands still attached."

I smiled humorlessly. "Give it time. We're both here now, aren't we?"

Santos laughed. "You still think you can protect her. That's cute. But you won't always be within arm's reach, Drakharrow."

Behind me, I could feel Pendragon's body tense up. "I want to break his nose," she murmured. "Then you can cut off his hand."

I squeezed her hand where it rested on my chest. "Deal." In my periphery, Visha had changed her position slightly. "Careful, Santos. It's a long fall." I gestured to the students around him. "If anyone wants to give the House Leader a little push, we'll let you live when we get to you," I called over.

Santos scowled. "You're talking like a man who has a way across the ravine." He pulled out a knife, just like I'd known he would, and walked over to the wooden pillars that held the ends of the rope bridge. "I think your path ends here, Drakharrow." He looked down and started to saw at the rope.

Someone near him shouted, but Santos was too distracted with his little knife to notice. I grinned as from the corner of my eye I saw Visha lift her bow. The arrow cut through the spray and hit Alastor Vane high in the shoulder. For a moment, Santos looked confused—and so did Vane. Then the dear professor reacted, letting out a shrill high-pitched scream, his face twisting.

"Get him out of here," Santos shouted. "Retreat!"

Larissa and Gretchen rushed forward, grabbing Vane and dragging him back from the edge of the gorge and into the tunnel behind them.

Silvio's head snapped toward us. "You'll regret that, Vaidya!"

"I doubt it," Visha yelled. "Want another?" Her bow was already raised. She fired, but Santos dodged.

He'd cut one rope, but the other was still attached. I saw Santos look at it and curse under his breath. My body was tense. This could go one of two ways. We could have a shoot-out across the ravine if Santos called his people back, or they'd retreat—and he'd leave the other rope.

Santos was chickenshit. So he raised his hand in a crude gesture, shouted something I couldn't quite make out—*being on their heels*, maybe?—then turned and ran down the tunnel after the rest of his squad. Beside me, Visha grinned.

"You idiots," Zaira said in disgust from behind me.

"What? Just a bit of harmless fun," I said, looking back over my shoulder.

"Harmless fun? Look at the bridge," she said furiously.

Kazmyn touched her shoulder. "Sister, you didn't really think they were going to leave the bridge intact, did you?"

"They were always going to cut the ropes," Rodriguez acknowledged. "Of course, they could now come back with bows and shoot us all." He glanced around. "How many bows do we have?"

"Three," Kazmyn admitted. "Mine, Visha's, and Magda's."

Zaira swore. "You idiots. They outnumber us."

"Zaira, this isn't a numbers game. We have a dragon, remember?" I reminded her.

She didn't look impressed. "You're going to transform on this narrow ledge, are you?"

"Need I remind you all we carry precious cargo," Hawl's voice boomed. Neville was perched on their shoulder. At some point over the last day, the

fluffin had decided the Bearkin was not only a wonderful protector but a convenient ride. Now the fluffin gave a little yap as if to say he agreed.

"We don't want you to get shot, Nev," I said, guiltily. "Sorry about that."

"What was it that Santos was shouting?" Sankara asked from the back of the line.

"Something about *heels*," Rodriguez clarified.

Sankara frowned. "Odd. Did he mean *shoes*?"

"Perhaps the vampire will throw old shoes at us," Hawl boomed. "If so, they will not stop me." They patted the fluffin's head.

"Look, let's just get across the bridge before they come back," Pendragon suggested.

We moved toward the crossing. Kazmyn stepped forward, eyeing the bridge. "It could be worse," he decided. We followed his gaze.

Dwarves were nothing if not confident, I thought. And they thought highbloods were bad.

The bridge hung over the gorge from ropes tied around four thick posts driven into the rock, two on our side and two on the other. The ropes were thick, but Santos had cut one so now the bridge swayed precariously on that side. Moreover, the whole span of planks were, well, uneven. Warped by time—but the mist probably hadn't done the boards any favors either.

"It looks decrepit," Hawl announced.

"Nonsense," Kazmyn said brightly. "Dwarven work is built to survive. This bridge will still be hanging here in another hundred years."

"Move along," Zaira declared from behind me. "We don't have all day."

"It's not as if we really have a better option," Pendragon muttered.

Kazmyn was ushering us forward as if the bridge were the front door to his house. "After you, my fanged queen." That was to Visha.

She shot him a look of disgust and then raced across the bridge before I could blink, jumping over the swaying planks at the end and landing on the other side with her bow still in hand. "It's not that bad," she called.

Pendragon and I went next. Soon everyone had come across—except Kazmyn.

He waited until we were all safe on the other side, then started walking slowly across. When he got to the middle he paused.

"Just cross, you idiot!" Zaira shouted.

"It's fine!" he called back. "Perfectly safe." He bounced on his toes. "See? Hundred years!" He did a little jump, and the bridge snapped.

Kazmyn's eyes were wide as he dropped. Zaira screamed.

He hit the water. I stared down after him. Shapes moved beneath the turbulent surface, long, narrow shadows.

"Now that I think about it, I believe Silvio said *eels*, not *heels*," Rodriguez announced authoritatively.

"Oh no," Zaira whispered. "They're stoneeels. They're blind. They hunt by vibration."

Down in the water, Kazmyn thrashed. Some planks were near him, and he seemed to be trying to reach one.

"Fucking idiot," Visha was swearing beside me. "Stupid fool." She was still swearing to herself as she jumped over the edge of the gorge and into the water with a rope in her hands. She'd looped one end around the still-standing post so fast I hadn't even noticed.

"Sankara," I bellowed. I wasn't going to let the post be what kept Visha alive. The highblood professor and I grabbed the rope, bracing our feet.

"What is she doing?" Rodriguez wondered. "I thought she hated him. She's going to get herself killed."

"Do you mind? That's my brother down there," Zaira snapped. Her eyes glistened as she looked down at the water.

The surface suddenly exploded with foam and spray. Kazmyn let out a shout.

"Blessed dragon, hear my cry," Zaira murmured to herself over and over.

I eyed her strangely, but suddenly the rope was burning my palms too much for me to wonder about it.

"Come on, Visha!" Pendragon shouted.

Visha rose up through the spray. She'd hooked an arm around Kazmyn's chest. I leaned back, putting my weight into it, as Sankara and I hauled together. Something sleek and dark skimmed below the surface of the water. I saw a flash of movement, a jaw full of pointed white teeth, and then Kazmyn screamed. His leg jerked, and the water around his calf turned dark.

"Faster!" Zaira shrieked.

Sankara and I pulled, lifting the two of them up out of the water. A few moments later Visha and Kazmyn hit the rock shelf. Magda and Pendragon were waiting to help them scramble up over the edge. Kazmyn collapsed on his back, coughing violently, his chest heaving. Rodriguez was already

moving, dropping to his knees beside the injured dwarf and beginning to bandage Kazmyn's slashed leg with practiced deftness.

Magda shook her head. "Nasty slash."

Blood ran in bright lines down Kazmyn's shin. Visha stood over him, her short hair dripping. "How do you feel, Kazmyn?"

He looked up at her with a shaky grin. "I feel good. I think I can still walk."

Visha nodded. "Great. That's great." Then she leaned over and punched him square in the face. Not hard enough to knock him out, but enough to make his head snap to the side. "That's for nearly fucking killing us," she snarled, already striding away.

Hawl let out a growl that I was pretty sure was a laugh. Rodriguez kept tying Kazmyn's bandage.

Shockingly, no one wanted to stay beside the gorge full of blind eels longer than we had to. We moved into the next tunnel, packs back on our shoulders, weapons at the ready in case Mortis decided to come back for more. I walked at the back with Visha. Ahead of us, Zaira walked beside her brother. Her eyes kept flicking to his bandaged leg.

"Have a nice swim?" I asked Visha.

"Could have done without the eels," she said shortly.

I raised a brow. "I thought you hated him." I tilted my head toward Kazmyn.

She looked thoughtful. "I like him better now that I've hit him in the face."

I snorted. Pendragon turned around from where she was walking just ahead of us. "I felt the same way about Blake."

Visha let out a loud scoff. That shut me up.

Zaira moved back toward us. She still looked a little ill.

"You all right, Stone Keeper?" I asked.

She nodded curtly, then dipped her head at Visha. "I wish to thank you for saving my brother's life."

Visha blinked. "Don't mention it."

Zaira looked like she was about to say more, then she seemed to change her mind. She nodded at us both again, then turned back to Kazmyn. Visha watched them both. Her expression had turned unreadable. I studied her, and I thought about Kazmyn and a bit about hopeless causes. I glanced ahead at Pendragon, her long red braid swinging against her back. I'd once

thought I was hopeless. Too angry and resentful to ever let anyone in. Yet here we were, alive. Together.

My mind drifted back to Bloodwing and to the other girl I once thought I'd have to spend the rest of my life with. I hadn't given Regan a lot of thought lately, but now I wondered how she was doing back at the academy.

I thought about how quickly Visha had dived into the water. I'd have done the same for Pendragon in a heartbeat.

Was there anyone to catch Regan if she fell? Did she want there to be?

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CHAPTER 50

REGAN



This job did not pay enough. In fact, now that I thought about it, I wasn't sure I was getting paid at all. Had they been paying Headmaster Kim, or had he been doing it on an honorarium basis? What about Rodriguez? He probably took extra food from the refectory and considered it even.

Most heads of the school had been former professors. Some even kept publishing papers after taking up the post. I'd found a half-scribbled one in the desk after Rodriguez had left—"Renaming the Blightborn: A Study of Epithets, Acronyms, and Their Historical Significance in an Unjust World."

Holy Bloodmaiden, if I was supposed to publish boring academic papers while running the school, I would … well, I wouldn't quit because I felt a weird debt toward Medra Pendragon and her ilk. But I would definitely be taking extra snacks from the refectory from now on.

Not for the first time, I wished I could quit. But if I quit now, Quinn Riley would win, and I wasn't giving that bitch an inch. I thought having Viktor as my archon during my first term as head-mistress had been bad. But Elaria Avari and Quinn Riley were a comparably terrible pair. They'd formed a match made in hell. Silvio Santos had gone chasing dragon-egg glory belowground, but he'd been sure to set Quinn up as his replacement first. She'd stepped into the spotlight perfectly, buddying up to Elaria like a parasite.

My jaw ached. I hadn't even realized I'd been grinding my teeth.

Elaria wanted the old rules back. All of the ones that Rodriguez, Medra, and the others had torn down—the curfews, restrictions, moldy classrooms, and unfettered feedings. "It will be wonderful to have a highblood back in

power who understands the importance of our traditions," Elaria had told me on the first day she'd come to visit.

Tradition: the word seemed to be used to justify every cruelty ever committed within school walls.

I touched a hand to my throat. Highblood traditions didn't just harm blightborn. Elaria had taken one look at my throat, cleared her own, and then asked if I'd heard from Viktor lately. Apparently she thought we were still in touch, that he was still my archon. I'd managed not to vomit and then had told her that his letters had been infrequent of late but that he'd asked after her, of course. She didn't seem to think it was a conflict of interest—my still being Viktor's consort and her personal pawn in her quest for greater Avari power. Maybe she didn't think Viktor was ever coming back. Or maybe she thought he'd ultimately join forces with her if he did. Which, to be fair, wasn't hard to believe.

I looked down at the pile of papers Dani had dropped onto my desk before she'd left for the day. They were all résumés. A number of staff were missing, three professors to be exact. I knew Professor Sankara and Professor Stonefist had gone with Blake and Medra's little squad. At least they'd had the courtesy to give some advance warning. But Professor Vane hadn't turned in his notice, just disappeared the same day roughly twenty students from Mortis did. I assumed he'd gone with them. Good riddance, in a way. He'd always made my skin crawl.

But on the other hand, I'd had to teach a class of Drakharrow First Years the basics of blood magic myself the day before. Now, that had been a nightmare. I'd probably never get the chalk marks out of that dress. Substitutes were hard to come by right now. What with all that was happening in Veilmar and the rest of the realm—a second wave of plague had started up, no necromancy involved this time. At least, not yet. So far, Bloodwing was a safe zone. The infection hadn't hit us on the island yet.

Elaria, pressured by me but also by her formidable grandson no doubt, had been ensuring the school received extra protection. She'd stationed guards on the bridge and also patrols around the cliffs. But I knew that if things in Veilmar deteriorated, Bloodwing would have to fend for itself.

So I'd been planning. Together with Kage and Lysander, I'd prepared a rotation of older, trustworthy students who were capable and willing to fight. I'd been calling our private combat classes *leadership training*. But I think they all knew what it really was: an emergency militia. We'd practiced

escape routes, sealing doors, dragging and carrying the injured to infirmaries. And we'd practiced eliminating infected highbloods without flinching. At first, that last one had been hard for some of the blightborn students, but then they'd gotten more into it.

Of course, it would have been helpful to include volunteers from House Mortis. But I couldn't trust anyone in that house. Quinn had done everything she could to make that impossible. Her newest demand sat on my desk: She wanted me to implement a ridiculous new rule in which infected highblood students could no longer be executed simply by virtue of exposure. No, she wanted them contained and safeguarded in case a cure was discovered. It sounded so humane on the surface; she wanted House Mortis to take care of the *containment*. I was pretty sure it was just an excuse to get some new victims for Mortis's necromancy. Chances were high that any plague-victim students would wind up back in my office trying to kill me if Quinn had her way.

I finished sorting through the stack of résumés and leaned back in my chair with a sigh. My gaze drifted. Inevitably, my eyes landed on the clock on the wall. I shouldn't have been thinking about bed, not at this hour. It was only six thirty at night.

There was a tap on the outer door of the vestibule, and I jumped. Dani and I had taken to keeping it locked, ever since the incident. Dani had already gone home, so I stood up and headed for the door. "Who is it?"

"Regan? It's six thirty. How long are you planning on working tonight?"

My pulse sped up.

"Yeah," Kage called. "We're tired."

"That was a joke," Lysander said when I didn't immediately reply. "Are you hungry? Can we take you to dinner?"

"Or we can eat in the room," Kage called. "Good option, too."

I bit my lip. Nothing had happened between us. Well, not nothing—we were sharing a bed, but we'd moved rooms. Kage had the largest suite in the Avari Tower, being House Leader. It had a sitting room, a huge master bedroom, a guest bedroom, and three bathrooms. Two ensuites and a half. Which was important, I'd realized, when you were sharing space with two men. Honestly, Blake would be pissed if he knew—not that I was sharing, but about how big the Avari suite was. Not that I was going to tell anytime soon. Who knew if I'd ever even see him again.

I wasn’t sure if anyone knew Kage, Lysander, and I were sharing the space. I’d left some of my things in the old room, and I still went back there once in a while, just so students could see me going in and out. But Avari students were a little different than the ones in Drakharrow. Less nosy and less bitchy. Maybe it was because some of them were wolves. Or because they were just better at keeping secrets in general. Either way, I’d started to feel strangely at home there.

Lysander had invited me to visit the Orphos Tower. He’d said the place had similar vibes, but I hadn’t taken him up on that yet. Every morning, he and Kage would walk me to my office. And every night, they’d pick me up again. They’d finally conceded they couldn’t keep standing watch for me every day, but they’d found more trustworthy guards who were on rotation. Some from Avari, some from Orphos. Evie, Kage’s Second, hadn’t seemed exactly thrilled to be placed on headmistress guard duty, but eventually Dani had won her over. That girl baked a lot of treats, and apparently Evie was a sucker for kava and cupcakes.

“Regan?”

Shit. I stood up and grabbed my coat. “I’m coming.” They’d told me sharing a bed was just for my protection. And I’d let myself believe the lie. Because sleeping in between them … well, it was the best sleep I’d ever had in my life. No more nightmares. No more lying awake with horrible memories, not with Kage on one side, Lysander on the other. They didn’t try to touch me—not ever. But sometimes, a shoulder brushed against me when they rolled over. Once Kage’s hand had been draped across my hips when I woke up. I’d pretended to still be asleep. He’d woken up and quickly moved it. Sometimes, Lysander’s breath warmed the back of my neck when he leaned too close. I’d gotten used to it. I kind of liked it.

That was the part that made shame settle in the pit of my stomach sometimes. I wasn’t *supposed* to want them near me like this. I wasn’t supposed to want anyone. I’d told myself it was about survival, that this wasn’t hurting anything. It was just the natural need to not be alone when the world was a place full of fangs and claws. But something was happening. Something in the air changed when one of them looked at me. And when both of them did at the same time? Well, things got … foggy.

I thought of them the way I’d found them that morning. Sitting side by side on the couch in the sitting room, towels still slung around their hips, voices low. They’d looked up at me, and the look in their eyes had made me

freeze right there. Not just like I was something worth guarding, but like I was something they were just barely stopping themselves from reaching out and grasping.

"I'm pretty tired," I admitted, as I slipped outside the office to where the two men were waiting. Kage had his hands shoved inside his pockets and had been leaning against the wall. Lysander had been pacing. As soon as I finished my sentence, he vanished like a shadow. I looked at Kage.

"He'll meet us back there," the Avari said with a grin.

Those grins seemed to be coming much more easily for Kage Tanaka these days. Funny that I'd once thought of him as a man who rarely smiled. I said something along those lines, and he grinned wider.

"I'm happy," he said simply, looking at me in a way that pierced my heart. I flushed, and he must have taken it for confusion. "I mean, yes, the world is going to shit, but it's Sangratha, so what else is new?" He shook his head. "These are dark times. With the return of dragons, it was always going to be complicated. But this?" He looked down at me as we turned a corner. "You don't know what it means to Lysander and me, knowing we found you."

My flush deepened, a strange gnawing guilt permeating me—not for the first time. But we'd nearly reached the Avari Tower. I was saved from replying as Kage opened the door for me and we stepped through. Up in Kage's suite, I felt like a weight was lifted as soon as the door closed. I might have hidden away in my room with the door closed, but sometime in these last few weeks I'd become used to their company, and not just when I slept. So instead, I took my coat to my room, then came back out and made a beeline for the long living room couch. I sank down onto it, closing my eyes with a groan, and kicking my heels off onto the floor.

Lysander was a stickler for neatness. I looked down at the shoes guiltily. "Sorry, I'll pick those up in a minute."

Kage was leaning against the doorframe to his room watching me. "Oh, I think he'll make an exception for you." He crossed the room and dropped into one of the armchairs near the couch, stretching his long legs out in front of him. "I give killer foot rubs, you know." He eyed my feet like they were a much more appealing body part. I felt my face heat up.

"They do hurt," I said cautiously. "But …"

He put a hand over his heart. "Just a foot rub. I swear."

“They smell,” I said, suddenly self-conscious. I swung them off the couch. “I should go for a bath instead of airing my feet in the common area.”

“Stop,” Kage commanded. “Regan, this is your home. You don’t need to go for a bath. And besides, you smell—” he sniffed at the air “—wonderful.”

“*Wonderful?* I can smell my feet from here. I’m sweaty and tired and—”

“And everything about you is perfect.” He said it so simply and with such firmness that I blinked. “Lysander and I love how you smell. Don’t you understand that?” There was suddenly a naked hunger in his eyes. I shifted on the couch. He blinked, and his expression changed to something milder. More palatable.

He sighed. “Look, it’s all right. No foot rub.”

I hesitated, then wiggled my toes. “I’d love one. If you’re sure.”

He didn’t even bother replying, just sat down at the end of my couch, lifting my feet up onto his lap. He wrapped his hands around my right foot, and I drew in a breath.

“Never thought I’d be accepting hospitality from the enemy,” I muttered as he slid his hands over my silk-clad foot. I tried not to react, not to show how much of an affect the touch was having on me, but it was hard to do. Who knew a foot rub would feel so … intimate?

Kage was careful. He didn’t touch above my ankle, didn’t even brush a hand over my calf. He kept his fingers on my feet, thumbs pressing into the knots of tension in my soles like he knew exactly what he was doing.

Blake had never given me a foot rub before. Thinking about him sent waves of something like shame stabbing through me. Blake had never really wanted me at all. It had taken me … a long time to realize that. To stop hoping that we were ever going to be the perfect match. I’d never been right for Blake. He’d always been settling. And maybe I had been, too. I’d wanted him because my parents had told me he was perfect for me. Because they’d seen our match as a way to elevate our family and gain more status. What was love compared to greater power?

“What are you thinking about?” Kage asked.

I cleared my throat. “I was just thinking about Blake.” Kage’s eyes darkened. “About how we were never right for each other,” I said quickly.

“Did he ever … mistreat you?” Kage asked quietly.

I shook my head. “Not like you’re thinking. No. He was just … indifferent.” I flushed. “He never wanted me, not really.” It was a hard thing to say aloud.

“You deserved better.” Kage’s voice was quiet. His eyes flicked to mine briefly, then back down to my feet. Suddenly, I knew what he was thinking about—not Blake, Viktor. But he didn’t ask. Didn’t pry. Instead, “How badly do you want to murder my grandmother right now?”

I gave a choking laugh. “A lot. How did you know?”

He shot me another wide grin, and the sight of the expression on his handsome face sent heat flooding through me. “She’s quite the troublemaker. My mother always said I took after her.”

“Then, I can only imagine what a brat you must have been.” I studied him. “You’ve always seemed so composed. It’s hard to imagine you as a wild child.”

“Oh, I wasn’t wild. Just stubborn.” He smiled at me. “I knew what I wanted, even then. And I wouldn’t back down.”

I drew in a breath just as the door opened. Lysander came in, effortlessly carrying a heavy tray in one hand. “I thought a night in might be best,” he said, glancing at me.

“Thank you,” I said, gratefully, looking at the tray. He might have asked for a servant to bring everything up. Instead he’d done it himself, knowing I valued privacy and quiet after a long day.

Lysander set it all down on the large, low table in the middle of the seating area and began arranging things. I saw a plate of sliced cheese, grapes, and berries; a deep dish filled with pieces of herb-covered baked fish; a bottle of a rare vintage of bloodwine; and three cut crystal goblets. The wine was most certainly not from the school refectory. Orphos must have had its own cellar.

Lysander filled a glass and passed it to me. I took a small sip and sighed. It tasted amazing—and went straight to the tips of my toes where Kage’s hands were still massaging. Lysander’s eyes were on my feet. I realized his mouth was tight.

I sat up a little straighter. “What’s wrong?”

He frowned. “Nothing.”

Kage’s face split into another grin. “He’s jealous.”

My eyes widened. “Jealous?”

“That I’m getting to touch you,” Kage explained.

I flushed. “Oh.” I swung my feet quickly off his lap and slid off the couch onto the floor, setting my glass down on the table and reaching for a grape.

Kage made a sound of disappointment, but I ignored him. Lysander looked at Kage. I watched as the House Orphos man smiled ruefully. The way they looked at one another was beautiful, but it also made my chest feel strange. What they had was so certain. And here I was, an interloper in their midst. I swallowed and looked away before I did something stupid, like admit that my blood had been turning to fire under Kage’s hands.

“So how long have you two been together?” I asked, filling a small plate with some fish and rice. I realized that I was genuinely curious—and suddenly felt silly for not having asked them sooner.

Kage moved, standing up and coming to sit down on the other side of the low table. “We first met when we were teenagers.” He sat down on the floor beside Lysander, crossing his long legs beneath him.

I couldn’t help staring at them there, side by side. They looked so handsome next to one another. Kage always looked like he’d been carved for war with his strong, soldier’s build, all blunt strength, broad shoulders, and thick forearms. Tonight he wore a fitted black shirt with the Avari crest on it. Something like you might wear when working out in combat class. He grinned at me, and I felt like I’d been let in on a special secret. When he smiled, it was so boyish; it didn’t match the calm, composed, strong Avari exterior that he showed the rest of the world.

I glanced at Lysander. He was a different kind of dangerous. I’d seen him fight, watched him move with lethal grace. I knew anyone who underestimated this man or his house was pathetically misinformed. His blue eyes were beautiful. His cheekbones were a crime. But it was his mouth that captivated me. Wide, soft lips that could hide so much—or be filled with expression when he chose.

I quickly reached for a bread bun, tearing off a piece and shoving it into my mouth before I could say something idiotic. “You’ve been together since then?” I said, pausing midchew.

They glanced at each other. Like two parts of one sentence that together made a whole. “Pretty much,” Lysander said. “We met one summer by chance.”

“My grandmother had taken me to the Sable Isles,” Kage explained. “Diplomatic trip. Lysander was assigned to show me around. We were

supposed to be polite, make small talk. We weren't supposed to actually like each other and make friends. But … we did."

Avari and Orphos weren't supposed to mix, they were supposed to be rivals. They couldn't be more different. Different loyalties. Different blood.

"So, you just … what? Didn't tell anyone?"

Lysander shrugged. "Basically. Sometimes we'd both be visiting Veilmar at the same time. We'd sneak out to meet each other."

"You've been together a long time, then," I said slowly. That sounded like Blake and me, except a lot more romantic. "Two rival houses. Forbidden love." I smiled awkwardly. "Doesn't sound very highblood."

"Well, we didn't really have a choice," Kage said. "It was just meant to be."

They were looking at one another in a way that made me feel awkward. I quickly lifted my goblet and took another sip. "Right," I said, like I knew what I was talking about. Like I'd ever felt anything similar. "So you've been a secret ever since? But you had to know it would come out sometime, right?"

Lysander nodded. "We knew when it came out that it wouldn't go over well." He glanced at Kage. "At least not with the Avaris."

"I told my grandmother recently," Kage confessed.

I stared at him. "She knows? Is that why she's so pissed off at you?"

He shrugged. "Among other reasons."

"Does she know about me?" I blurted out before I could stop myself.

Silence. Then Kage's eyebrows rose, as if he were pleased. "Not yet."

"Not yet?"

"No, but I'd be happy to tell her. Anytime you're ready," he said calmly. "I'm not hiding it, if that's what you're asking."

I rubbed my forehead. "I think you both might be insane."

"Love does that to you," Kage said simply. "There's a power to it."

I felt my cheeks heat. The word was far too heavy for dinner. I ignored it. But there were things I couldn't ignore. "You've claimed we're a triad," I started to say.

"We are. There's no question about it," Lysander said. "Can't you feel it?"

I ignored the question. "I just don't see how you can be sure about something like that. Sure about me."

Lysander's intense expression softened slightly. "Regan, we're sure."

Kage tilted his head. “We know.”

“How?” I demanded, my voice a little shrill. “You don’t even *know* me.”

Lysander’s blue eyes held mine. “We know enough. We know you’re the missing piece.”

Heat crawled up my neck. “We’ve slept in the same bed, but … I don’t understand how you can both be satisfied with this … arrangement.”

They glanced at each other. “We know some of what you’ve been through,” Lysander said quietly. “Not all, but … we can guess.”

Kage’s face had turned wrathful. I assumed he was thinking of Viktor. I squished the piece of bread between my fingers, crushing it, blinking hard.

“You don’t owe us anything,” Lysander said bluntly. “You don’t have to give us anything. We want to be here—with you. You are enough. Your presence is enough.”

“All we want is to keep you safe,” Kage added.

I stared at them. It made no sense. Highbloods weren’t supposed to be like this. Highbloods took, they didn’t wait. High-bloods weren’t self-sacrificing. And most importantly, highblood triads didn’t cross house borders. Not when it came to the four great houses. We didn’t blend bloodlines. We just … didn’t. But they’d been doing it all along, I realized, looking at them. They’d been with each other. Fed from one another. Mingled blood. *Among other bodily fluids*, I suddenly thought, with a sharp flush of heat.

Had they sensed my thoughts? Maybe. Because Lysander’s hand rose, his fingers sliding into Kage’s hair at the base of his neck. He leaned forward, his mouth meeting the Avari’s. The kiss started off tender, then it turned breathless. I watched their mouths move, the crash of lips, the play of tongues. The kiss carried history. They’d been doing this for years. Stealing moments. Keeping secrets. Hiding desire. And waiting. Always waiting.

For me?

My breath caught. I hated that my body was reacting to the kiss. Heat pooling low between my thighs, my pulse hiking. As if I were keeping secrets, too.

Lysander broke the kiss. He looked at me. “Does this bother you?”

I stared back at him. “No. Yes. Maybe.”

Kage was looking at me, too. “How? Are you … disgusted?”

“No! Bloodmaiden, no. Of course not.” I stumbled over the words. “You’re … beautiful together. But I feel like I should go.” I pushed myself

to my feet, feeling shaky. “I shouldn’t be here. I feel like I have no right to see this.”

Lysander rose. “You have every right. You’re a part of this.”

“But I’m not, not really.” My throat felt choked. “I’m broken, Lysander. I’m so fucked up. I have no right to be here. I don’t know why you even want me.”

Kage was on his feet in an instant, his face storm-tossed. “You have every right. We want you all the time. In any way we can have you.”

“But you can’t have me,” I said desperately. “No one can.” I felt sick. “I don’t know if I ever want to be touched … like that … again.”

“But watching us just now,” Kage said softly, “it made you …”

I flushed. “Blooddamn you and your wolf nose.”

He didn’t laugh. “We want to make you happy. Is that so terrible?”

“We will never push you, Regan,” Lysander said quietly. “But what if you were the one in control?”

My heartbeat sped up. “What do you mean?”

He slowly untucked his shirt, then pulled it up over his head, exposing bare skin, ripped muscles. Fascinated, I watched as he reached for one of Kage’s hands and brought it to his chest. Kage ran his fingers lightly over the planes of Lysander’s chest, then hovered over a nipple, brushing it and tweaking. He lowered his head to Lysander’s chest, hands wrapping around his waist, and I watched him brush his tongue over the nipple. Lysander’s hands threaded in Kage’s hair, his eyes half-closed.

“Fuck,” I whispered. My hands were clenched by my sides.

“Do you like what you see?” Lysander asked.

I gave a tight nod. “But …”

“Tell us what you want to see next,” he suggested. “Instruct us.”

I exhaled slowly. Was I really going to do this? *Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.* They weren’t going to touch me. I trusted them. But watch them? Could I do that? They looked incredible together. The thought of telling them where to put their hands, their mouths, their … “Fuck,” I whispered again. “Fucking fuck.”

Kage lifted his head to look at me. “I think that’s a *yes*, Lysander.”

“Shut your fucking mouth and take your shirt off,” I whispered. I clapped my hand over my mouth. “Oh, Bloodmaiden.”

Kage grinned. “That’s a good start.” He shucked his shirt off and tossed it onto a chair. “Trousers, too?”

I stared at his lower half, the obvious outline of his rigid cock pressed against the fabric. Kage was big. Really big. Then I made the mistake of glancing at Lysander's crotch. "Shit," I murmured. If anything, the Orphos man looked even larger. "What the hell," I said, twirling my fingers and reaching for my wine glass again. "Take it all off." I downed the bloodwine, then poured myself another glass.

Lysander stared at me. "If you're going to drink, we'll do this much. But we won't touch you, not even if you ask us, too. Do you understand?"

I stared at him. "Yes. I understand." They were going to protect me. Protect me even from myself. Now, that was … well, it was something. Then I realized Kage had stripped. "Holy shit."

The Avari's entire body was a work of art. But his cock … I'd never thought one could be, well, beautiful. His was big, golden brown, long, and silky smooth. I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry.

Lysander stripped his trousers off; in another moment he was naked, too. He lifted his hands, running them through his silver blond hair, and I watched the biceps in his arms flex, suddenly picturing those hands running over my body as he pressed his cock between my thighs. Or his mouth.

I cleared my throat. "I don't know how to do this."

"Tell me to touch his cock," Kage suggested, grinning playfully.

"All right." I took a breath. "Wrap your hand around Lysander's cock. Kiss him."

That was all the motivation Kage seemed to need. His mouth crashed back against Lysander's as his hand wrapped around the other man's cock, stroking slowly but firmly. Lysander gasped against Kage's mouth. His hands roamed over the Avari's shoulders, touching and caressing.

"Lower your mouth," I said suddenly. "Take Lysander's cock between your lips." I bit my own lip self-consciously, my face flushing. "I mean, if you want to."

Kage was already on his knees. He grinned over at me. "Oh, I want to. Believe me, I want to." He ran his hand up the shaft of Lysander's cock. "But what about you?"

"Me?" I shook my head.

"No," he interrupted. "What are you going to do while I suck Lysander off?" He looked at me with interest. "Why don't you lie back on that couch and get comfortable? Maybe touch yourself?"

“I …” The wetness between my thighs wasn’t going anywhere, it was only growing. I watched Kage lave his tongue over the head of Lysander’s cock and made up my mind. “Yes.”

“Why not take off a few layers?” Lysander suggested, his eyes going to my legs. “You want to be comfortable, right?” Then he groaned as Kage took more of him in his mouth. “Fuck.”

I watched, fascinated, as Lysander wrapped his hands through Kage’s hair, tugging him in closer. “Well, fuck,” I muttered to myself. I wore a short, button-up black lace dress over silk stockings, nothing else. I reached my hands up beneath my skirt, grabbing the edge of the waistband. Then I hesitated. *Fuck it.* I grabbed the edge of the waistband and slid it down. Soon my stockings were a puddle at my feet. I quickly lay back down on the couch, feeling my skirt ride up my legs, hitting midthigh as I leaned back into the corner against a cushion. I suddenly felt self-conscious, knowing the burn marks on my legs must be showing.

“Fuck, you have gorgeous legs,” Lysander murmured, his eyes on me as Kage lapped at his cock.

I put my hands nervously on my lap, not knowing exactly what to do with them.

Kage popped his mouth off Lysander and looked over at me. Behind him, I could see Lysander’s cock, wet with Kage’s saliva, the tip red and glistening. His eyes gleamed. “Can we see your tits?” Lysander pulled Kage’s hair, gently but firmly. “What?” Kage asked innocently. “Don’t tell me you don’t want to see them, too.” He looked at me. “I bet they’re fucking gorgeous.”

I nibbled my lower lip, feeling myself relax into the moment. “Fine.” I undid the top button of my dress. Then another. The lace dress was fitted with some boning; I didn’t need to wear anything extra underneath. I’d never been sure about my breasts. They were nothing special. Large and just … there.

“Another?” Lysander suggested, his eyes on my cleavage.

I sucked in a breath, undid two more buttons, then pushed the fabric aside.

“Fuuuck,” Kage breathed. “Absolutely magnificent.”

I felt heat flush up my body, up my stomach, over my chest. My nipples tightened as they stared at me.

“They’re even more perfect than I thought they’d be,” Lysander admitted.

“I wish I could wrap my mouth around one. Suck one nipple between my lips, taste the little bud as it puckered and turned hard, and then …” Lysander gave Kage’s hair another playful yank. “Fine,” Kage grumbled. He looked at Lysander’s cock and licked his lips. “Can I keep going?”

“Can you?” I stared. “Yes. Keep going.”

Kage’s jaw widened as he took more of Lysander in, letting his cock fill his mouth. I imagined the feeling of the silky shaft pumping in and out of his throat. Lysander’s eyes were half-lidded, his legs planted firmly as Kage pumped his own cock with one hand and sucked with his mouth, his head bobbing back and forth expertly. My hands weren’t in my lap anymore, treacherous things. They’d slid down my legs. One was between my thighs. Not doing anything. Just … sitting there.

“Do you need some help?” Lysander asked, breathlessly. He moaned as Kage took him deeper.

“What kind of help?” I whispered.

“Perhaps instruction?” he suggested.

I nodded slowly. “All right.”

“Slide one hand over your breasts. Lift your skirt up higher with your other. Touch yourself between your legs—I want to see how wet we’ve made you.”

That was fairly detailed. I did as he said, running one hand over my breasts, feeling the way my nipples had already tightened. Then I lifted my skirt and slowly slid a hand between my thighs. I was drenched. I moaned as my fingers touched swollen, sensitive flesh.

“Slide your fingers across your pussy,” Lyander commanded. “Slide one inside.”

It had been a long time since I’d touched myself like this. It had been a long time since I’d been this turned on—to be honest, probably never. Kage and Lysander seemed like they’d be attentive lovers. The kind I’d only read about in books. I’d never had male attention like that in real life. In my experience, it was never really as satisfying for me as it seemed to be for my partner. The only time I’d ever come was on my own. Now I couldn’t help but wonder … Could my triad change that?

I moaned as my fingers slid across my bud, down my pussy and inside.

“I said one,” Lysander complained.

I gave a little whimper. “I can’t help it.”

“Do you want to play this game or not?” he asked.

I nodded. “Y-yes.”

“Then, you don’t come until I do,” he said, smiling wickedly. Beneath him, Kage gripped Lysander’s hips, his mouth moving up and down the shaft. Lysander groaned, his eyes on me as I slid a finger inside myself as Kage sucked him off. “Yes. Like that. Good.” Kage bobbed back and forth again, and Lysander’s lips parted. “Oh, fuck. Yes, I’m close. Keep going.” And then Lysander made a sound, half choke, half growl, and I knew he was coming.

I stared as Kage slid his hand back and forth, his cheeks hollowing as Lysander came inside his mouth, and he sucked every bit of him down, then leaned his head back, and licked every last drop of him off with his tongue, panting a little.

My fingers stroked my clit, one finger still sliding in and out. It wasn’t enough, though, I wanted more. I couldn’t ask for it: They’d sworn they wouldn’t touch me. Not even if I wanted them to. But suddenly I found I did. I *wanted*. Very much. Very badly. If not their cocks, then their mouths. Any mouth would do. I let out a little whimper.

Lysander looked at me. “Do you see now? How good this could be? All of us together?”

I nodded helplessly. “Please.”

“Tell Kage what you want him to do,” Lysander said. He sank down into an armchair, still buck naked—but unlike some men, he didn’t look vulnerable or weak or exposed. He was already half-hard again. He slid a hand around his cock as Kage moved toward me, his own erection large and obvious.

“I won’t touch you,” Kage reminded me.

“Touch yourself,” I gasped. “Please.”

He smiled slowly, then wrapped a hand around his own cock and started to slowly slide it up and down.

“Yes,” I said, staring greedily. My fingers were thrumming my clit, trying to find the rhythm I needed. I suddenly wished they were Kage’s fingers, or his mouth. I imagined Lysander’s mouth on my breasts while Kage’s tongue lapped at my clit, and I moaned.

“You’re close,” Kage encouraged. “Come on, sweetheart.”

I made a sound of pent-up frustration, watching him as he stroked himself with precision. “I can’t.” I eyed him. “Please, maybe if you … ?” Dammit, was I actually going to beg?

Lysander watched me with interest. “Quite the predicament you’ve gotten yourself into, sweetheart.”

“Oh, so you’re both going to call me that?” I snapped. “This isn’t fair. It’s two against one.”

Lysander smirked. “You’ll be glad of that one day,” he teased.

I groaned. “Please. If you just …”

“Shit. I’m close,” Kage said. His eyes were wide and, I realized, roaming my body hungrily, moving from my pussy then back to my breasts. “Can I?” He looked at Lysander.

The Orphos man sighed. “I suppose it wouldn’t be touching exactly.”

“No, it wouldn’t be,” I said quickly. I slid up the couch just a little and unfastened more buttons until the dress gaped open, exposing all of my body.

“Oh, fuck,” Lysander murmured. He licked his lips as he stroked himself. “You picked quite the girl, Tanaka.”

“I told you she was ours.” Kage sounded proud. “And her blood. Can you imagine what she’ll taste like?”

I suddenly imagined both men’s lips wrapped at my neck and felt dizzy. I moaned. I was so close.

Kage stepped closer, his hand stroking the head of his cock. And then my body took over. I came in gasping waves just as he did. His seed sprayed over my chest, hot and wet, running in slick rivulets down my breasts and over my nipples just as my climax hit me and crested. I cried out, body shuddering and arching, drops of Kage running hot down my body.

“Holy Bloodmaiden,” Lysander breathed. I glanced over and saw his face flushed, his hand still wrapped around his cock.

Before they could stop me, I’d slid off the couch. I crawled over on my hands and knees. What was I doing? I didn’t know. Or I did. I knew I wanted some part of them inside me.

Before Lysander could say no, I pushed his hand away and wrapped my lips around his cock, and he came, his cock pulsing inside my mouth and filling my throat. I swallowed, tasting him. I’d never liked doing this before; it had always felt like a chore, something I’d made myself do. Even worse, something I’d been forced to do. But now, like this with Lysander, it

was just … different. I was in control. I felt safe. He tasted good. He tasted right.

He wasn't touching me. He wasn't forcing my head down or grabbing my hair or squeezing my breasts. I'd gifted this to him—my mouth, his climax. I pulled back, suddenly self-aware. Both men were silent for a moment, both looking at me.

Then Lysander stood up. "That was …" He shook his head. Then he offered me his hand. I took it, and he gently raised me to my feet, like I was a princess stepping up to a throne. His eyes moved over my body briefly, taking in the dress parted down the middle, my breasts, Kage's seed slick on my skin. "You're truly the girl of our dreams," he said softly. "Let's get you cleaned up and ready for bed."

He led me to the bath, ran the tub full of hot water, then gestured for me to get in. I slid the dress from my shoulders, suddenly no longer self-conscious. I knew Kage was standing behind me in the doorframe. I knew he had a great view of my ass. I looked briefly at him over my shoulder. The lust written on his face made me tremble with need again. I quickly lowered myself into the bath.

"We'll go clean off and get changed," Lysander said softly. "You just relax."

"Wait," I said, turning to look at them, one hand wrapped around the edge of the tub. "First I want to see you feed."

They looked at one another. "I am a little peckish," Kage admitted, grinning.

I sucked in a breath as they moved against one another, fitting together perfectly, arms wrapping around each other as their heads turned to the side. I watched Kage clamp down, his fangs fitting into the side of Lysander's neck as Lysander tilted his own head to do the same. The sounds they made while they fed sent my toes curling. I was starving, I realized. Starving for blood. How would theirs taste? Lysander would be sweet but salty. Kage's would have a special tang to it, like the winter wild.

It was a new, erotic experience, observing these two men with their fangs sunk deep in one another's flesh. I slid my hand between my legs as I watched them feed, stroking myself. Finally, they pulled apart, blood rimming both their lips. They kissed, and the blood mingled. I sank back in the bath, closing my eyes.

An hour must have passed. And I'd thought of nothing terrible. Nothing from my past. Only about them. I wanted to stay like this forever, with only thoughts of my triad. I wanted to tell them I was ready to have them touch me. To use my body. To take me however they wanted. To show me all the pleasures they could give me. Ready for us to be a real triad.

But when I opened my eyes … they were gone.

I took a long bath, then dried myself off, and padded into the bedroom. Both of them were already there, lying under the covers. I quickly dropped my towel, letting them see … everything. Then I touched my hand to the lamp, turned off the light, and slid into the bed.

"Good night, Regan," Lysander whispered from beside me.

"Good night, sweetheart," Kage whispered from the other side.

I was in the middle, the huge blanket draped over me. My body was still tingling, but it had also relaxed. I knew I should fall asleep. I knew they weren't going to touch me that night anyhow.

"Good night," I whispered to my two consorts. "Sweet dreams."

And then my eyes closed, and I was deep in the best sleep of my life.



In the morning, I woke up, alert and already aroused. I'd fallen asleep, clean and naked. But I only wanted to be one of those things to be true for a little while longer. I was the first one awake, facing Kage. His eyes were closed, his lips slightly parted. He snored softly. I smiled slightly to myself. These men were mine. And I was theirs. I had never felt so safe. So protected. So fucking wanted. But I had to make them fully mine. I wanted to be fully theirs in every single way there was. I wanted to give them that. Take that from them.

I wouldn't be going into the office that morning, I decided. Bloodwing would have to survive for a few hours without me.

I turned my body, letting my ass nestle against Kage's hips, as I stretched out toward Lysander. He slept on his back, his head tilted in my direction, eyes still closed. I draped my arm over his chest, then slid my hand across him, fingers brushing over his nipples. Instantly his eyes opened. He looked at me, and I stared back, letting Lysander see what was in my eyes: naked

desire. I wasn't going to hold it back, not anymore. I let him see it all. My lust—but also my fear.

He lifted a hand and stroked my hair. "You're safe with us. Do you believe that?"

I nodded slowly.

"Good. Then, sit on my face, sweetheart. I want to taste you."

My heart leaped. Holy shit, this was happening.

"Hey," Kage said grumpily from behind me. I could feel his cock, hard and erect against the cleft of my buttocks, pressing there, gently but firmly. "No fair. Cheater."

"You'll have your chance," Lysander said, clearly not about to back down. "Face. Now."

I pushed the blankets off and sat back. "Are you—?"

"Don't even finish that question," Lysander snapped.

"All right." I scrambled forward, my breasts swaying a little as I crawled over his body and up his chest. His hands found my hips and yanked me forward more quickly. I gasped. And then his mouth was on me, his tongue sliding into my pussy. "Fuck," I gasped. "Lysander …" My breasts felt heavy, my nipples tight with need. Then warm hands wrapped around them, kneading them gently. Kage's fingers slid to my nipples, pinching and teasing. I moaned as Lysander's tongue slid over my clit. He lifted a hand from my hip and slid it between my legs, working a finger inside me.

"May I?" Kage murmured, his breath hot on the side of my neck.

"Yes. Please," I gasped, arching backward a little.

His fangs slid into my skin, and I felt him suck. My body was a molten fiery thing. I was melting. I was going to collapse onto Lysander any second.

"Fuck," I breathed. "That feels so good."

Kage broke away, panting. "She tastes as good as you do, Lysander. Wait until you try."

Lysander was still busy between my legs, working his mouth over my pussy, his tongue lapping at my clit. Kage squeezed my breasts and sank his fangs back into my neck, and that was all it took. I reared back, then slammed my hips against Lysander's face, my whole body quivering as I climaxed. Kage braced me, hands wrapping around my waist, stroking me like a wild animal, as Lysander slowly moved his mouth off me.

I sank back against Kage, sliding off Lysander and onto the bed, leaning against the Avari for support. I tried to catch my breath. “That was …”

Kage kissed my cheek. “Just the beginning, sweetheart.” He looked at Lysander. “I want to fuck her so badly right now.”

Lysander wiped a hand across his mouth, then licked my wetness off it. “I know. Me, too.”

“You got to taste her,” Kage accused.

Lysander smiled. “So did you,” he reminded him.

“Trade?” Kage suggested, hopefully.

“Wait, just a minute,” I said, without any real force to it. “I need a moment.” But the truth was I was already turned on again. The idea of them both wanting to fuck me was … Well, maybe I should have been afraid of it. Reluctant. But now that I’d seen them together, now that I’d felt their mouths? I wasn’t afraid. I felt as hungry as I knew they were. “Is this what all triads are like?” I murmured, as Kage slid to one side and gently pushed me back onto the bed so he could lower his mouth to my breasts.

Lysander gave a sharp laugh. “Definitely not.” He rolled onto one side and started stroking his cock slowly as he watched Kage taste me. “You fuck her, and I’ll suck her,” he suggested lazily.

Kage’s head snapped up. “Deal.” He looked down at me. “That is, if you’re ready, Regan?” He looked guilty. He glanced down at himself, at his hard erection. I followed his gaze.

“I …” I bit my lip. “I think I want that.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. He looked reluctant. “We don’t want to push you.” He glanced at Lysander. “This is moving faster than we thought it would.”

I eyed them both, curious. “It is?”

“Of course,” Lysander said quietly. “We never assumed anything. Things could have stayed the way they were.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Chaste forever?”

Kage laughed. “Not exactly chaste. We had each other.”

“Oh. Right.” I was quiet for a moment. “I want to be with you both that way. If you want me.”

Kage’s cock was inside me before I could finish the sentence. I gasped. He’d only slid half in, letting me feel him. “We’re both … rather large,” he said, ruefully.

“So was Blake,” I said bluntly. “But he never made me feel like … this.”

They looked at each other, then Kage smiled shyly at me. “That’s good. That’s the bond.”

Lysander’s breath was warm on my neck as he moved closer. “Can I … kiss you?”

I turned my head to face him. “Of course.” I suddenly felt shy, too. Our lips met carefully. I could taste myself on his tongue. He’d had my pussy in his mouth before we’d even kissed, and yet, there was something right about that. He’d possessed me. Now Kage would do the same.

But it went both ways. I slid my fingers through Lysander’s hair, feeling its silky smoothness. I traced a finger lightly over his cheekbones. “You’re so fucking beautiful,” I whispered, as Kage slid more fully inside me. “Both of you.”

Lysander looked back at me seriously. “Thank you.”

“And you’re … mine?” It was a question.

He kissed me lightly. “We’re yours.”

“Yours,” Kage growled. He thrust inside me, and I moaned. “Shit,” I heard him whisper. I looked up at him. His face was worried.

“You didn’t hurt me,” I quickly reassured him.

He ran a hand over his face. Was there anything hotter than Kage Tanaka, naked, with his cock inside me as he looked down at me with that worried expression? “Still, I want to be careful,” he mumbled. “I can do this gently or hard. Which do you want?”

“Both,” I admitted. “Can we do both?”

He half grimaced, half grinned. “I’ll try.”

And then Lysander’s lips were pressed to my neck. I felt his fangs sink into my tender skin. I closed my eyes. I suddenly wanted so much from these two men. I wanted them to taste me. I wanted to taste them. I wanted them to fuck me. But I really wanted them to fuck each other, too.

Was this the afterlife the temple taught us about? Had I died and gone into some upper realm? Because right now, here in this bed, with both of my mates … I felt like I’d died and floated up to heaven.

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CHAPTER 51

MEDRA



We were walking again. On the one hand, it was a nice change from being at Bloodwing all the time. At least we were outdoors … sort of. On the other, I wished I'd packed another pair of shoes. I'd brought the most comfortable boots I owned, but after a few days of walking in them nonstop, I was starting to worry the soles were going to wear out.

We walked through a vast cavern. Ahead of us, the ground dipped and opened into a wide meadow that glowed in a soft palette of pastel colors. The air smelled sweet and fragrant, like crushed petals. Blake was walking just ahead of me. His sword was sheathed and strapped to his back. His broad, muscular shoulders looked amazing in the fitted black leather armor he wore. The shimmer of light high above our heads reflected off his pale hair, reminding me of a golden crown.

"Hold up, folks." Kazmyn had been walking ahead of everyone. Now I saw he'd stopped at the edge of the field.

"What is it?" Blake asked, striding up to him.

"What is so frightening about a field of flowers?" Hawl grum-bled, moving past me, with Neville on their shoulder. The fluffin was asleep on a pillow Hawl had somehow managed to sew onto one of their pauldrons.

Kazmyn grabbed at the bear's arm. "They're *not* flowers. At least, not the kind you're thinking of."

I looked past them and into the field. Kazmyn was right—and wrong. The blossoms were like nothing I'd ever seen before. They were tall as my waist, for one. Their petals were moving, furling and unfurling, lifting on thick stems and reaching out.

"Fang flowers," Zaira declared, marching up.

“Because they have teeth,” Kazmyn added helpfully. “They’re flesh-eating plants. At least, they are when they get the chance.”

“There are stones in the field,” I said, pointing. Scattered flat slabs of stone rose a foot or two above the plants, interspersed but close enough to one another that one could jump to the next.

“Stay on the stones,” Zaira instructed us. “Follow them through the field. The second ward lies at the center.”

“What is with dwarves and killer plants?” Visha complained. “Did the designers of this place only have one good idea and they decided to reuse it for each ward?”

“There were also those eels,” Blake reminded her. “Those were scary but kind of neat.”

“They took a chunk of my flesh, and you call them *neat*,” Kazmyn protested dramatically. His leg had already healed a lot. Both Zaira and Rodriguez were claiming credit, of course. Rodriguez said it was the anti-infection balm he’d applied before wrapping the bandages. Zaira claimed it was a special salve she’d been cleaning the wound with nightly—one that was exclusive, apparently, to official members of the Emberwatch. They’d been squabbling about that damn salve ever since.

Now Blake looked out at the stones, then back at me. “Stay close.”

I nodded. We moved forward. The leaps were fairly easy. Perhaps they’d have been trickier with slightly shorter legs, but Magda, Zaira, and Kazmyn seemed to be holding their own. I saw Hawl pause to ask Magda if she’d like them to throw her from stone to stone. I turned away, biting the inside of my cheek before I could hear her reply. There was no throwing of dwarves. Instead, we made our way fairly easily. From time to time a flower near us would snap open, revealing an edge of sharp pale green teeth that looked bizarrely out of place along such beautiful petals. But usually the plants opened and closed so slowly that they didn’t pose much danger.

Finally we reached the center of the meadow and the ring of runestones. Zaira moved onto the slab holding the stones, already pulling her blade out. She examined the stones, but her face looked more confident this time. There was less hesitation before she sliced her palm and dribbled her blood over one of the runes.

The rune flared with a faint glow. But then nothing else happened. She looked back at us, frowning. “I believe I have the right rune.”

Blake cautiously stretched a hand out over one of the flowers. The petals didn't snap at him. "Seems to be good."

"Not very original," Visha complained again, as we moved past the runestones and onto the next stone slab, heading for the edge of the cavern where a tunnel beckoned us to the next stage of our journey. "Same trick, different plants basically."

"We weren't nearly choked to death, so I think I like the flowers better," I was saying, then stopped. Magda had paused on the stone in front of us. She'd swiveled her body to look back at the runestones. Slowly, she raised a hand, pointing. There, in the shadows between two of the runestones on the raised slab, lay an arm. It had been severed below the elbow and flayed of all its skin. Notably, it was also missing a hand.

"At least they took the same arm," Blake said weakly. "Instead of, you know, chopping off the other." He looked at the arm and shook his head. "Still, pretty fucked up."

"Poor Lord Sharma," I murmured. I glanced at Zaira.

"We knew they passed through ahead of us," she declared loudly, lifting her chin and clearly trying not to let the sight of the arm affect her. "We must move more quickly to catch up."

"They don't have a dragon or a fluffin," Blake said to me, his voice low. "So I figure there'll be a standoff either way. Eventually, we'll all reach the same place, right?"

"Sounds wonderful," I said sarcastically.

He touched my shoulder gently. "We'll be all right. We've been through worse."

We'd fought House Mortis before. We'd been outnumbered that time, too, and it hadn't gone well. Blake must have read my expression.

"This is different," he murmured. "We have excellent fighters with us. Sankara and Magda? Hawl? They're skilled." He glanced at the Bearkin. "I bet Hawl could take on a dozen Mortis students single-pawed."

I tried to smile. "I hope you're right." But it couldn't be that easy. Could it?

The cavern seemed to have read my mind, because that was when I heard it: the sound of water in the distance. A rush that was growing to a roar. The cavern began to shudder. Below my feet, the stone slab trembled.

"Move!" I yelled. "Higher ground!" I looked around. On our left, out past the field of killer flowers, rose a high cliff of stone, like a rampart along one

side of the cavern.

“Cliff! Now!” Blake yelled, clearly having seen the same thing I had. “Everyone move!”

We ran—just as the sound of water built to a louder roar. I glanced over my shoulder as I ran through the sleeping field of flowers. Behind us, the tunnel mouth vomited a wall of surging white water. It slammed into the field, flattening flowers and snapping steps.

The meadow was turning into a sea.

We moved quickly, reaching the edge of the cavern before more than a trickle of water had reached our feet. Everyone started to climb, but some of us were better at it than others. Visha practically leaped up the rock face, then leaned down, holding out a hand to help pull a panting Zaira to safety as Kazmyn jumped up easily beside her. Blake was next. He turned back to grab my hands, pulling me up the last few feet, before leaning over to help Rodriguez. Hawl was the slowest. The bear clambered up, paws on stone. I watched in concern, but in the end had nothing to worry about. Bears could climb trees: Hawl’s paws ended in sharp claws which they now dug into the rubble, heaving themself upward. Still, they were slow. I watched, holding my breath, bent over, my hands held out in case they needed one.

Finally, everyone was up. Dazed, we looked around. The ledge we stood on didn’t follow the entire cavern wall. It was wide enough for us to stand on about three abreast without someone slipping off, but it wasn’t going to be enough. Not when the water was still rising below us.

“How the fuck did House Mortis get through this?” Visha demanded bluntly.

Zaira was staring down at the water. “I don’t know. Perhaps the alarm was delayed. Perhaps they passed through the field somehow without triggering this.”

“Or maybe they all died, their bodies were washed away, and now there’s no one ahead of us.” Kazmyn glanced around. “What? We can hope.”

“He’s right,” Magda said. “If they did have to pass through this, they wouldn’t have all made it. The water is a curse, but it probably thinned their ranks.”

“That won’t help us unless we can get out of here,” Rodriguez pointed out. He’d crouched down and looked out at the water. “I don’t think it’s slowing down. It’ll reach us eventually. Then, what?”

“Can the little one swim?” Hawl boomed. “If not, I will carry him on my back.”

I paled, thinking about us trying to swim out of there. “That won’t help. Look.” I pointed to the mouth of the tunnel we needed to get through. The water would soon block it completely.

“There’s only one other way out.” It was Sankara. We followed his gaze. High up on the far left side of the cavern, in the same direction we’d been heading, was an opening—a wide rough rectangular hole in the rock, like the mouth of another tunnel, slanting upward.

“I don’t think I can jump that far,” Kazmyn joked.

“I don’t think any of us can,” Visha said sourly. “We’re completely fucked. Unless one of us has …” She looked at Blake. Soon all of us were looking at Blake.

“Wings,” Hawl finished. “The fluffin is saved. Even if the rest of us must perish in this flood.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves there, Hawl,” Blake said. He met my eyes. I saw tension there. But strength, too.

“You can do this,” I said quietly.

Was this a test? To see if we had a dragon with us? Did that mean House Mortis had failed? Or had the alarm even gone off for them at all? It didn’t matter. The answer was here: Blake was our only way out.

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CHAPTER 52

BLAKE



The water rose higher, clearly intent on swallowing us all whole if it could have its way. It had reached about a quarter of the way up the cliff already. I wondered where the water was coming from. Just what kind of mad geniuses were these dwarven architects? But that was a discussion for another time.

"All right," I said, forcing my voice to keep level. "No one is going to die today."

Medra was nodding. "Blake can transform. He can carry us across."

Rodriguez frowned. "I thought you could only carry your own rider."

"On my back, yes …"

"Oh, shit no," Visha breathed. "Talons? You're going to pick us up with your fucking dragon claws?"

"Not all of you," I conceded. "Neville should be able to ride on my back with Pendragon." I knew Nyxaris had carried the fluffin before; there was a special hollow spot for the tiny creatures on a dragon's back.

"Thank the gods for that," Hawl boomed. "You may take the fluffin and leave me here to die. Or perhaps I will swim."

"Hawl might have a point. We could wait for the water to rise," Rodriguez murmured, looking down at the meadow-sea, "then swim across to the tunnel." He looked across at the opening.

"That would be cutting it pretty close," Pendragon pointed out. "You'd have to be confident you could swim across in time."

"And how do we know there are no eels in that water?" Visha added. Rodriguez paled.

"Look, I don't like this any better than you do," I said. "Would anyone prefer to die or swim than be picked up in my talons? Speak now."

No one said anything. “You may pick me up last,” Hawl said finally. “I am … undecided.”

“Fine.” But Pendragon was giving me a look that said she’d murder me if I left the murderous bear behind. I decided to honor their wishes and save Hawl for last; by then hopefully they’d have switched from *undecided* to *decided to let Blake carry them across the water with humble gratitude*.

I rolled my shoulders, trying to loosen the tension. Trying to pretend I wasn’t scared out of my mind. Now was probably not the time to tell everyone I’d never actually transformed in midair before. I reached for one of Pendragon’s hands and squeezed hard. “Everything is going to be fine. Get Neville ready.” I turned away before she could even nod, backed up against the side of the cavern, then ran forward and jumped before I could lose my nerve.

For a heartbeat, I fell. The water rose up to meet me. The air tore at my clothes. Panic flared.

And then I shifted.

Heat exploded through my body as my bones snapped and extended, skin splitting into scales, shoulders wrenching outward. My wings burst forth, catching the air with a loud snap. I beat them, once, twice, with heavy strokes and rose up out of the plunge, my weight lifting in the air. I leveled out over the water, hovered a moment, then turned, banking back toward the ledge. I could do this. I was in control. My dragon was me and I was my dragon and I could fucking do this. I could save everyone’s life. It felt good to know that, to know I could save and not just kill.

Spray from below tossed upward, coating the underside of my scales. I could see Pendragon standing at the cliff’s edge.

I love you, I told her.

I could see her face break into a grin. *I love you, too. You’re amazing. You know that, right?*

I flapped my wings. *I feel pretty amazing*, I said, a little shyly. *We really doing this?*

She nodded and backed away from the edge, getting prepared. *Neville and I are ready.* The little fluffin’s ears were perked up, as if he thought this was all an excellent idea.

I think Nev is more than ready for another dragon ride, I said. *I wonder if he’s ever ridden an Inferni*.

I hear they're far superior to Duskdrakes. I could hear the smile in Pendragon's voice.

Oh, absolutely, I deadpanned. *Faster and prettier to look at*.

Neville gave a little yap as if he could hear us.

"Don't you dare tell Nyxaris he said that," I heard Pendragon say to the fluffin, just as I flared my wings and flew alongside the cliff. "Shit!" I heard her mutter. And then she was running forward with Neville racing beside her like it was just another game of fetch. Together, they leaped over the edge of the cliff and onto my outstretched wing.

I felt Pendragon slide, heard her scream, then felt her grasp onto the ridge of my wing and start to crawl forward. She moved across it, and I hovered for a second. I waited for her to cross onto my back before I lifted my wings again and moved across the cave in a circular pattern.

The little guy all right? I asked anxiously. Nev was so small I could hardly feel him there, but I knew he was onboard, as it were.

He's right beside me. Florence was right. There's a little hollow here, like a seat. He fits inside it perfectly. A pause. *I think he's falling asleep. I don't think he realizes we're in the middle of a life-and-death crisis.*

I felt my jaw stretch wide. *Of course he'd nap at a time like this. Poor little guy is probably sleepy from having to listen to us all shouting. You ready? I'm turning back*.

I swept back. *All right. One at a time.*

On second thought, Pendragon said in my mind, *I think two at a time would be better*.

I glanced down at the water. *Shit. I think you're right.*

"Visha and Kazmyn!" she shouted across to the group on the ledge. "Get ready!"

Kazmyn? Why Kazmyn? Do we even like Kazmyn? I complained. *Why not Visha and Magda?*

Magda looked nervous, Pendragon explained. *Let's let Vish and Kaz show them all it's going to be fine*. She paused. *It is going to be fine, right? You're not going to, you know—*

Don't you dare even say it, I ordered, a wave of anxiety hitting me as I pictured accidentally squashing Visha.

I had Visha and Kazmyn in my sights. I dipped lower, angling my body toward the ledge. And then my talons reached for them. It didn't know how I was going to do it until I'd done it. I grabbed for them, and they kind of

grabbed onto me, and then I could feel them hanging there. There was some high-pitched, girlish screaming—not from Vish, but from Kazmyn. Well, and from everyone standing back on the ledge watching.

Shit, I hope no one's dead.

I can't tell from up here, Pendragon reminded me. *But probably not. You can do this, Blake.*

I flew across the cavern. It was a short flight; the opening was soon rushing toward us. Landing would take too much time, I decided, since the water was rising too fast. Plus I could already see it was going to be a tough, awkward spot to land in. So I kind of … tossed them.

Oh gods, Blake, Pendragon gasped as she saw Visha hit the stone.

But Vaidya was fine. She rolled once and then leaped up in a crouch, as if she'd done it before a hundred times. Kazmyn landed a little less gracefully. He smacked shoulder-first into the wall of the tunnel. I couldn't stay to see how he was. I was already banking.

Two down, Pendragon said.

Don't count or you'll jinx it, I said nervously.

You're adorable. You're doing fine. Just go.

I flew back toward the ledge, my wings slicing through the air. Rodriguez and Magda were standing near the edge together, Rodriguez shouting something—probably about how insanely unsafe this all was. Magda's face was grim. For all we knew, the dwarven scout had done this before and just wasn't telling any of us. I wouldn't have been surprised.

I picked them up, ignoring Rodriguez's yelps, and carried them to the other side. When I tossed them in, sure enough, Magda landed on her feet just like a cat. Rodriguez landed on his back-side and immediately started coughing.

Third trip. By the time I circled back, the ledge was almost gone. It was an island in a sea of water. Waves slapped against the cliffside.

Zaira and Sankara were next. The Stone Keeper looked terrified. Her eyes were wide, her jaw was clenched. Sankara stood beside her, saying something I couldn't hear. He looked solid as a statue and had one hand on her shoulder.

He's a good man, Pendragon remarked. *Kind, too.*

For a highblood, you mean.

No, I mean for a man.

I snorted. *Fair point.*

I swooped down, snatching them both. Everyone before this had been so light. But with Sankara, I could feel his weight. Zaira screeched as my claws folded around her.

Be gentle, Pendragon murmured.

I'm trying. I loosened my grip just a fraction. Zaira didn't plummet down into the water, so that was good.

The opening loomed before us. I tried to toss them more gently. Sankara hit the stone in a roll and came up on one knee. Zaira fell but caught herself against the tunnel wall.

Hurry, Pendragon urged. *Hawl …*

I wheeled back again. My stomach dropped. *Shit.*

The ledge was gone. Hawl was gone, too. Then I spotted them, a brown furry head floating just above the surface. Hawl's paws churned in the water.

Does that mean they're still undecided or … ?

Grab them, Blake. Pendragon's tone told me now wasn't the time to fuck around.

All right, all right, I said hastily.

The Ursidaur's armor wasn't doing them any favors. Their head bobbed once, then vanished.

Blake. There was a hitch to Pendragon's voice.

It's all right, I tried to reassure her. *I can still see their shadow below the surface.*

Then the bear's head bobbed up again.

Thank the gods, Pendragon gasped.

I dropped, diving down, thrusting my talons into the water and catching something solid. Fur and armor. The sense of weight. I yanked up, wings flaring, water streaming off my front legs. Down below, the bear was shouting something I couldn't make out.

They're saying thank you, *right?*

Let's hope so, Pendragon muttered.

I beat my wings, flying across the cavern one last time. The tunnel mouth rushed to meet us.

This was it. I had to land while carrying a Bearkin and without scraping Pendragon against the roof of the tunnel like smeared jam. Or tossing Neville from his little nest like a smashed egg.

Shit, I murmured. *Here we go.*

It seemed like no one had realized the huge, red dragon was eventually going to have to make a landing. As they saw me coming, there was a lot of shouting. Then everyone started to run deeper inside the tunnel opening. I came in a little too hot, my wings flaring wide. The tips scraped against the side of the cavern, and I swore.

Hawl swung beneath me like a pendulum. I managed to lift my legs and toss the bear forward. They hit the tunnel floor with a thump, rolling inward. Then my own body was hitting the rocky floor with a jarring thud.

You all right up there? I asked anxiously. *I hope you're ducking*.

I'm ducking. I'm all right. So is Neville.

I felt Pendragon moving. Then she was sliding from my back, fluffin under one arm.

Neville didn't want to get off, she said, looking up at me. *You going to, you know … ?*

You want to get some clothes ready for me? I said, suddenly realizing I was about to be naked with everyone staring at me. *And maybe—oh, I don't know—ask everyone to turn the fuck around?*

"Blake's going to shift back," she bellowed loudly. "Everyone turn around unless you want to see dragon ass."

For fuck's sake, I muttered. *Thanks a lot, Pendragon*.

I mean, I *want to see it*. She waggled her eyebrows at me with a grin.

Oh, you're going to see a lot of it tonight, I promised her.

And then I was shifting back as Pendragon rummaged in my pack, which Sankara had kindly carried over for me. I grabbed a pair of trousers as she tossed them and started pulling them on before anyone could decide they wanted a full frontal peek.

I'd done it. Everyone was alive. No one had fallen or been squashed or drowned. "I didn't kill anyone," I said aloud.

Pendragon moved toward me, her eyes soft. She wrapped her arms around my waist, hands flat and warm against my bare skin. "I'm proud of you. Do you hear me?"

I felt proud of myself. No burning. No destruction. I'd *saved*.

Behind us the water was rising. Pendragon grabbed my hand with one of hers and reached for my pack, hoisting it onto her shoulder. She tugged me along, and we followed the others deeper into the tunnel. I looked at the people I'd rescued and then down at my girl. Maybe my heart wasn't quite as black as I'd once thought.

“I think you tamed this dragon, Pentagon,” I murmured. She squeezed my hand harder.

For a few moments, I let my mind wander away from the vault that was trying to kill us and the Mortis squad up ahead. I thought about my mother. I’d spent years afraid that she’d chosen to leave. That she’d stepped into the Sanctum because she loved the Blood-maiden more than her own children. It had been a convenient lie, a way for me to stay numb and detached. To keep not caring.

The truth was both better and worse. She hadn’t left because she didn’t care. She’d left because she did. She’d given her life to protect me. Now I’d accepted something: My mother was gone. I would never see her again. And if that were true, then her sacrifice was real, and I owed her more than my anger. I owed her proof that her sacrifice meant something. That the life she’d given hadn’t been wasted on me.

I thought of all I’d lost. My mother, Aenia, any chance of a healthy relationship with Marcus. My belief in my father’s goodness. The Peacebringer was a myth, but one Drakharrow *had* been good. That wasn’t a lie. And another thing: I still had people I loved to survive for. People who needed me to make better choices. Who needed me to protect them.

I thought of Theo, so brilliant and brave. I thought of Visha, who’d become my closest friend these past two years. Sure, she could stab you and smirk while she did it. But the point was, ultimately, she cared. Even about the people she sometimes pretended to hate.

I thought of Pendragon—my true fire. My rider and my reason for going on. The girl who had seen me at my worst—and stayed. Love wasn’t a choice, she’d told me. Like always, she’d turned out to be right.

There were others, too. People who cared about me and who I cared about. Sankara, Rodriguez, Magda, and little Neville. Even that fucking murder bear.

This was the life my mother had bought with her own. Not a throne like Viktor wanted. Not power like Elaria Avari secretly craved. But a chance to make a better world. A chance to choose to be a better man.

I glanced down at the girl by my side with her flamered curls. We could do this. We could get through this. We were both alive. And I planned on keeping it that way. So far, so good.

One ward left to go.

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Book 4
The Bloodmaiden

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CHAPTER 53

LUNAYA



Persis had named the little female fluffin Nell. Now Lunaya watched while they played through the bars of the fluffin's cage. Nell had quickly taken to Persis. Lunaya watched as Persis held a finger out through the bars. She crept forward, her black nose twitching, and then licked his fingertip.

Persis's face was delighted. "My little beauty," he whispered.

The fluffin answered by flopping onto her side, presenting her soft white belly. Persis slipped his fingers through the cage, trying to reach the animal.

"She likes me," he said, over his shoulder, as if surprised.

"Of course she likes you," Lunaya answered. "You're her friend."

Persis turned with a frown on his young face. "She shouldn't be in the cage."

"I agree."

"Why don't we just leave?" he burst out. "We could run away together, the three of us."

Lunaya's throat tightened. "I am like the fluffin. I can walk around in my cage, but I can't leave it."

"Because of Marcus and Catherine," Persis said. Lunaya nodded. The boy was persistent. "What happens if you go too far away? Have you tried?"

"It hurts," Lunaya said simply. There was more she could say. But she didn't want to scare the boy. She glanced down at her hands. She'd worn a dress with long sleeves. But where the skin peeked out, there were webs of black. The thick dark branching veins were all across her body now—mirroring the ones that covered the Luminthar.

How ironic and how tragic that poor Molindra had been the one selected for this terrible task. Luminthars were meant to draw greater strength from the sun. But the Bonewood was almost always a cloudy, foggy place—like a land under a curse. It hadn't been the Luminthar's sun powers they wanted, it had been Lunaya and her Orphos blood. Catherine had twisted it, shaping Lunaya into an unnatural key. Now Lunaya could climb onto a dragons' back and feel Molindra's power beneath her hands. She could hear the dragon's voice in her mind with the power of the blinding sun. But every day that went by like this took something from her that she would never get back. Her life-force fed the dragon and kept it alive. Eventually, what Catherine had done would kill both girl and dragon.

Lunaya watched Persis playing with the fluffin. The boy was trapped, too, but his cage was larger than the other children's. Once upon a time, he had been friends with the O'Rourke children. He knew the house, knew the servants. When the other child wards had been brought to the manor and confined, he had been ignored and allowed to roam free.

"I'm stuck here, too," Persis said, confirming that he had a measure of self-awareness.

"You're small. Quiet."

"Good at sneaking," he clarified. "People don't notice me. Or they don't care."

She could see this hurt him. "I care about you." The words didn't lift his spirits. The boy's face was bleak and hopeless. "It won't be like this forever," she said before she could stop herself.

Persis blinked. "What do you mean?"

The fluffin had her face pressed to the bars. Her huge ears were perked. She seemed to be listening, too.

"We're going to do something. Something very brave but very dangerous."

Persis's eyes were wide. "I can do that. I don't mind danger."

Lunaya smiled slightly. "I know. You're a very brave little boy."

"I'm twelve," he corrected. "Practically a grown-up." He paused. "There's a new girl in the dungeons. I've seen her."

Lunaya's breath caught. "Persis!"

"She's a grown-up girl. Like you."

Lunaya had heard the others speaking of the girl. She knew who she was and what had been done to her.

Persis's voice was small when he spoke again. "I heard her screaming."

Lunaya closed her eyes. She pictured the dark-haired girl she'd once shared a class with—Florence Shen. She'd worn glasses. She'd been clever and kind. She *was* clever and kind. But now there was a leash around her soul. Lunaya knew bonds of pain. What she shared with Marcus and Catherine was cruel. They'd hurt her body. The dragon's, too. Molindra had been whipped, tortured. And Lunaya … well, she didn't like to think about what had happened to her. At least her mind was a place she could still lock. Florence Shen didn't have that. Not anymore. She'd been soul-bound to Viktor Drakharrow. His hand was wrapped around her throat now from the inside.

Lunaya had tried to imagine it. Her memories and mind pried open. Her will gone. Her body no longer something she could direct. Her mouth speaking words that might not be her own. A living puppet. Persis studied her face, his own childlike one troubled.

"You need to be more careful," Lunaya forced herself to say. "You shouldn't sneak down to the dungeons anymore."

Persis's cheeks flushed. "I've been bringing them food. They're hungry. They cry all the time." He looked at her beseechingly. "Some of them are so little."

The words hit her like a slap. "You're kind," she said, her throat aching. "And very brave. But listen to me. If you draw attention to yourself now, you won't be able to help me, to help anyone."

Persis glanced at the fluffin in the cage. "Who are we helping? Will we help Nell?"

Lunaya turned her head to the door, listening. She'd thought she'd heard footsteps. But no sound came. She breathed out. "We're going to try." She met the boy's eyes and, this time, let him see a little of the hope that hid behind hers.

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CHAPTER 54

MEDRA



I turned over, pressing my face against Blake's shoulder. He was already asleep. Our tent smelled of smoke and damp wool. Even without day and night or any seasons, a chill seeped through the cracks in the rock, and sometimes when I lay awake at what was technically night, I could hear the wind whistle through them.

I studied the man laying beside me. He rested on his back, one arm tucked behind his head. His breathing was even, slow and sure. He'd put us both through quite a workout, so it was little wonder. I blushed, thinking of the sounds we'd made and how they must have carried. Blake had reminded me that if we'd had to listen to Rodriguez getting railed, then we could do our part. On a journey of life and death, shame had fallen away a little. There was no privacy down here beneath the stones.

I stared up at the shadowy roof of our tent, my body nestled against Blake. I wanted to sleep, but it wasn't coming for me. That happened sometimes, especially when you needed sleep the most. I closed my eyes, trying again. Holding on to one thought above all others, like a dragon flying over dark waters. *Orcades.*

I breathed in and out. Eventually, the world softened and blurred.

I stood on a polished floor of white marble flecked with gold. Above me swept a graceful arched ceiling. Narrow white columns rose around me, their sides fluted, their surfaces etched in patterns of gold and silver. Along the walls, frescos of stylized blossoms and sunbursts repeated in a motif. I could hear music trickling in softly from a nearby room.

I walked ahead and pushed open a pair of golden doors, stepping into a ballroom. Gold candelabras hung above my head. Mirrors framed in gold lined the walls in between tall windows. Outside I caught a glimpse of an

ivory city. On one side of the room, a woman in a white gown sat playing a harp of polished golden wood. She faced away from me, and long amethyst hair streamed down her back in a radiant cascade. I stepped forward, my bare feet quiet on the marble. As I drew closer, I saw the tips of her ears were high and sharply pointed. I came nearer until I could see the curve of her cheek. Her fingers moved over the harp strings with the skill of ages. Finally, she stopped playing. She turned and looked up at me.

My breath hitched. She was the loveliest woman I had ever seen in my life. Her eyes were large, wide, and a magnificent shade of violet. Her lips were a delicate pink and full and puckered like a rose. She glowed with charm and magic like a fire glowed with heat.

Orcades smiled. “Hello, my darling.”

“How are you doing this?” I asked stupidly.

I had never seen my mother in the flesh. I knew it was a dream, but it still felt very real. There was a lump in my throat. I’d known she was beautiful. I’d known she was fae. But this … It was one thing to know and another thing to see.

I reached out a hand to touch her hair. It felt soft and silky. She grasped my hand in hers and looked down at it. “Tsk, tsk. You must take better care of your nails, my love.”

I opened and shut my mouth. Then opened it again. “Well, I haven’t had much time lately,” I said finally.

“One must always find time for personal care. Appearances are powerful things,” she said brightly. “They win hearts and minds.”

I sighed. “Yes, Mother.” I narrowed my eyes. “Is that why you called me here? To lecture me on personal appearance?”

Her face softened. “Of course not. And you are a very beautiful girl, my darling. No matter what the state of your nails.”

“Thank you,” I said sourly. Then my face softened, too. “It’s incredible seeing you like this.”

She touched a hand to her hair. “Isn’t it? I’d almost forgotten what it felt like.”

“To have hair?”

“To have a body at all. Well, one without claws and scales.”

“How is Molindra?” I asked guiltily.

“She … endures. You asked how I was doing this, and the truth is I’m not sure. I don’t feel more powerful. If anything, quite the opposite.”

I gestured to the window. “That city … Is this where you are now?”

She gave a tinkling laugh. “Oh, how I wish I was back in Numenos. No, my view is much gloomier than what those panes show.”

I swallowed. “Right. How are things going there?”

She glanced past me, looking at the windows and their impossible view of sweeping fae towers and curling spires. “Poorly,” she said, with false brightness.

“Orcades …” I didn’t want more details, and yet I needed them.

She plucked at a harp string with one perfectly manicured finger. Why were hers so perfectly inaccurate in the dream while mine were embarrassingly true to life? “There’s been another wave of the plague. I don’t know how it will have impacted your school, but here it’s all but taken out the nearby village.”

“I see. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, well, I’m rather sorry, too. The highbloods residing there were infected first. Then the blightborn were simply doomed. I doubt they had time to run. There were children among them.” Her fingers strummed the strings. I knew she had lived far longer than most people. She had lived through plagues and famines and wars. But she was fae, and so she had survived, endured, thrived.

“And the Veil?”

Orcades shrugged. “Weaker but still standing. Just as we anticipated.”

The ballroom was too beautiful for this conversation. Too full of sunlight. Too gilded.

“What about the guardian? The Bloodmaiden, have you been able to speak to her?”

Orcades sighed. “Guardian. You mean Blake’s mother?”

I nodded slowly. “You said she was a goddess *once*. Doesn’t that imply she can live forever?”

Orcades looked at me with sympathy. “My darling …”

I felt heat rise in my cheeks. “Just tell me.”

“I’m not trying to patronize you,” she said hastily, “but as you may remember, even gods can fall. You should know that better than anyone.”

I felt weary with resignation. “So you haven’t been able to speak to her.”

Orcades shook her head. “I’m sorry, my love. I know you were hoping for better news for his sake. But if there was a chance, it passed when Marcus and Catherine began their brutal attack. Blood magic. Dragon fire.

Whatever thing is inside the Veil, whatever power is supporting it even now … it is busy. And it has been torn apart in unimaginable ways.” Orcades met my eyes. “You must tell Blake,” she said, not unkindly, “that his mother is gone.”

My throat felt tight. “Do you think she’s … suffering?”

Orcades paused. “If you believe it will be a comfort to him, you may tell Blake his mother is not in any pain.”

I stared at her. “But is that the truth?”

She shrugged. “What do you think?” She tilted her head. “You love him. You wish to ease his pain.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to lie to him,” I said.

Another shrug. “People lie about many things. The best lies are the ones we tell to stop someone from hurting.”

I had a bad feeling she was right about that. “What do you think being part of the Veil is like?” I asked.

She paused her strumming. “I can’t imagine. Countless women offered to its power. Used and bled.” Her violet eyes lifted to mine. “No, my dear, I truly can’t imagine.”

My lip wobbled oddly. “But isn’t that exactly what happened to you?”

“You did not offer me,” she pointed out immediately. “I offered myself.”

“Do you regret it?”

She thought for a moment. “I regret not being close to you. What for you must have been a burden—”

“It wasn’t,” I said quickly.

She looked skeptical but smiled. “Indeed. Well, for me, I believe it was the sweetest period in my life.”

I stared at her. “Your life? Your whole life?”

She laughed. “My life has been long. But you have been the sweetest part of it, Medra, my love. Is that so hard to believe?” I couldn’t speak. She studied me, her expression soft. “I wanted to see you here, like this. Before things become … more intense.” Her voice turned wry. “It seems sometimes dreams do come true.” Then her voice changed. “I wish to ask you a favor. May I … hold you?”

I must have flinched.

Orcades’s eyes were suddenly bright. For a woman who could wield power like Florence wielded a quill, she looked suddenly uncertain. “As you may recall, I never had the chance. Not once.”

My heart clenched painfully. I wanted to speak, but the words wouldn't come. I gave a tight nod. She stood up slowly, every movement graceful. My beautiful mother.

"I didn't get to hold you when you were small," she said softly, never taking her eyes off me. "I didn't get to rock you to sleep or to kiss your forehead when you were sick. I sometimes wonder what sort of a mother I would have made if I'd been given the chance. Even just for a few days."

The ballroom blurred. My vision swam.

"Oh, Medra," she murmured. "You are the most perfect thing to me."

I gave a choking sob. And then I was in her arms, wrapping mine around her waist. She was slender like a willow—and for a moment she was stiff. Then she made a sound, not quite a laugh or a sob, and her arms came around me, tight and desperate. Even in the dream, she smelled like a fae princess. She wore a light flowery fragrance—no doubt something priceless. I was sure I smelled like tent and smoke. I was rough and unpolished. My hair was tangled. Hers was smooth and perfectly coiffed. We were so different in so many ways. But she was my mother. I buried my face against her shoulder.

"You're a little taller than me," she whispered. "I suppose you get that from your father."

"Did you love him?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"No," she said bluntly. "Never. But he gave me you, so I'm grateful for that."

Tears slid down my face. "I'm scared."

Orcades pulled back without letting go of me completely. Her face twisted with emotion. "Oh, my darling." She touched my cheek. "I'm scared, too. But it will be all right." She bit her lip. "I'm glad Blake's with you. He's very strong."

"I thought you liked Kage better," I teased.

She gave a tinkling laugh. "I adore Blake because he adores you. I would love anyone you loved, Daughter, don't you know that?"

"I think you would have made a very good mother," I whispered. "But you also already are one."

She blinked hard. Then she leaned forward and kissed my forehead. "I would have loved you so much if I'd been given the chance. I want you to know that. I would never have let go."

I sobbed. Her arms tightened around me, embracing me again. Finally, she loosened them, looking at my face, wiping my tears away with her fingertips.

“I refuse to spend the entire time here with you in tears,” she said, lifting her chin in that queenly way I knew she would possess. “Let’s go over the plan. Tell me where you are. Tell me all your news. Which ward have you reached? How are things with Mortis?”

Part of me just wanted to stand there in her arms, to simply be her daughter for a while. To be held and told for five minutes I didn’t have to be brave. But the other part of me—the part that was fae, the part that was a rider—knew the cost.

I opened my mouth and began to tell her about the water and all the other wards. Everything except the prophecy.

As she’d said, the best lies were the ones we told to stop someone from hurting.

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CHAPTER 55

REGAN



I stood at the head of the boardroom table, trying not to look at the spots of blood on my rolled-up sleeves. I'd carefully selected a silky short dress of gold and silver that morning, not knowing I'd soon be in crisis mode.

The first wave of infected attacks had come at dawn. Now we were deep into the afternoon, and all learning had come to a stand-still. Classes had been canceled. Students were in lockdown. My office had become our command center. The vestibule area was full of runners from the various towers and older students wearing white armbands marked with the symbol of a single drop of blood. These were my leadership students: I was calling them Hallwardens. The Hallwardens escorted runners as they delivered messages between the houses and distributed essential supplies and equipment. We had no idea how long this second wave would last, so we were fortifying: Food, medicines, and other supplies were all being delivered to each tower.

The First Years had been split into three groups and escorted to Drakharrow, Avari, and Orphos—we weren't giving fucking Mortis any First Year blightborns as fodder. We were going to keep all First Years safely tucked away and protected as best we could under the circumstances.

I glanced around the table, looking at my council. In Blake's and Visha's absence, Theo had stepped into the role of Drakharrow House Leader. His dark blond hair was tucked behind his ears, and he wore a coat of black and red. There was blood on his knuckles. His blightborn partner, Vaughn, stood beside him, a leather harness over his chest filled with small blades. I snuck a closer look at Vaughn; I knew Viktor had captured him and his

grandparents. He was looking hale and hearty now. But I also knew some scars could never be seen.

On either side of me, Kage and Lysander stood like a mismatched pair of threats. I decided I would never grow tired of looking at either of them. Even in a time of crisis, I couldn't help stealing a peek—at Kage who stood with his black shirt sleeves rolled up, revealing forearms roped with muscle, or at Lysander, all cool lines and calm control, with just a few long strands of silver hair spilling out of his bun, softening the sharp edge of his cheekbones.

"Avari Tower is locked down tight." Kage's Second sat sprawled in a chair. Evie was compact and athletic, wearing black leather Avari armor and had a silver crossbow propped up against her chair.

"The infirmaries are filling up quickly," Healer Elycia said. Her pretty, dark face was filled with tension. "Mostly blightborn with bite wounds. We had two highblood students with infections brought into Avari earlier." The tension in her face grew. "Both had to be … released."

She meant *put down*. The healers were using the word *released* because it was a little softer-sounding, I guessed.

"House Mortis continues to keep their infected alive," Professor Briggs said. She looked stressed and exhausted. Quinn Riley hadn't bothered to show up for the meeting, but Briggs had. I knew she was doing her best to take care of the few blightborn students who still remained affiliated with Mortis, but Quinn must have been making that hard.

"An incredibly dangerous decision," Elycia said quietly. "There is no cure. If the plague is a kind of corruption spreading because of the cracks in the Veil, there may very well never be one."

"Quinn is delusional," Theo said. "But we already knew that."

"She must have other motives," Vaughn remarked. "Otherwise, why put her own house at risk like that? Could she know something about the plague we don't?"

"I doubt it," I said. "But that's very charitable of you." I looked at Dani. "You have the Hallwardens' report? What's the status of the school perimeter?"

Dani's head jerked up from the sheaf of papers she'd been annotating. "The perimeter looks clear. The bridge is holding. We have Hallwardens patrolling the exterior of the school hourly."

The guards Elaria had provided us had vanished sometime between last night and that morning. We assumed when the second wave had hit Veilmar, they'd either panicked or been told to give up their posts. Since their disappearance, we'd built a makeshift barricade over the bridge. I just hoped it would hold.

"Are all students accounted for?" Kage demanded. "Can we get confirmation on that?"

"No, they're not." It was Librarian Shen. I looked down the table at Florence's mother; Jia Shen looked so much like her daughter. I knew Kage had given her an update on Florence, but I didn't think he'd told her how bad things really were or else she'd have looked much more anxious than she already did. "We've been taking head counts all afternoon and checking them against the enrollment records."

Jia and her librarian colleagues had been called in as record-keepers. The attack that morning had begun in the library. We'd arrived in time to save most of the staff, but now many were refusing to leave the towers where they'd been offered sanctuary. Jia had been the only one brave enough to attend my little meeting; she'd arrived with Evie. I knew Kage's Second would make sure she made it back to the Avari Tower safely.

Jia glanced at Evie. "We believe there may still be a few students and at least one librarian apprentice who weren't evacuated from the library this morning."

"Vaughn and I will take a few patrols and see if the library is clear or not," Theo offered.

"At least five students from Mortis are also missing. All blight-born. There are reports of students barricaded in a classroom near the entrance wing," Professor Briggs said.

I glanced at Kage and Lysander. "Let's finish up here. Then Kage, Lysander, and I will check it out. If anyone is there, we'll escort them to the nearest tower."

Lysander looked around the table. "Each house is responsible for continuing to sweep the corridors nearest your tower. Our goal must be to reclaim the school quickly and wipe out the spread."

A murmur of assent went around the room, and the meeting ended. Everyone emptied out of the boardroom and then the outer vestibule. No one left alone. I watched as Evie and a group of Avari students shepherded

Jia and Dani away, then locked the door of the office. I knew Dani had had enough of blood splatter on her desk.

Lysander was already standing at the junction of the corridor, checking sightlines and waiting for Kage and me to catch up. We moved quickly toward the entrance wing of the school, Kage slightly ahead, me in the center, and Lysander behind. We hurried down the stairs in the foyer and moved to the row of three classrooms that lay just behind the wide, sweeping staircase. Kage was already flinging doors open. The first was empty and quiet. Same with the second.

The third …

At first, I didn't hear anything. But Kage's face had turned grim before he'd even touched the door. Then I heard chewing. Kage moved in. He wore a pair of steel swords on his back, and both blades were already out.

"Be careful. There might be survivors …" I started to say.

Lysander touched my arm, shaking his head. I stepped inside the room, wrinkling my nose. Inside, the classroom told the tale of a battle lost. Desks had been overturned, a window was shattered. Chairs were toppled or shoved out of the way. Near the lecture stand, two highbloods crouched over the five dead blightborn students. The bodies were fresh, but I could smell the rot coming off the two infected.

I heard Kage growl, then saw the infected highbloods look up at him, mouths dripping with gore. His blades flashed, and two heads struck the floor. Lysander and I hadn't even had to do anything. I looked down at the students; I recognized one of the blightborn. She'd delivered some letters to my office a few weeks earlier.

"We'll clean up the classroom soon. We'll get their bodies moved," I said aloud. "I'll send word to their families." I looked at the two dead highbloods: one wore Drakharrow colors, the other Avari. They'd been students, too. "All of their families."

We headed back up the stairs and had nearly reached the top when we heard voices. I turned to see Quinn Riley strolling into the lower vestibule from a side hall, a group of Mortis students flanking her. Quinn looked good. Her silver-white hair was braided back, her red and white Mortis uniform still clean. She wore dark red lipstick and didn't seem to have a hair out of place.

"Glad to see the plague isn't ruining your day," I called down.

Her head snapped up, eyes narrowing as she caught sight of us. “Headmistress Pansera, so good to see you’re still alive.”

“What are you doing here?” I demanded. “Shouldn’t you be protecting your tower?”

Then I saw the satisfaction on her face. The way she wasn’t afraid. No, Quinn was enjoying this. She’d known it was coming.

“You did this.” Beside me, I sensed Kage and Lysander stiffen.

Quinn cocked one brow. “Did what?”

“You let the infection in,” I guessed. “Why? Why would you want any of this?”

She grinned. “House Mortis handled it beautifully, didn’t we?”

“You killed the guards on the bridge,” Lysander said. A statement. Not a question. Kage swore softly.

Quinn lifted her chin. “The wave was coming. We just sped things up. This school’s grown weak. You might have his grand-mother fooled—” she nodded to Kage “—but Mortis already knew the truth.” She looked between the three of us and grinned nastily. “Does Elaria know about you three? Fucking the enemy, eh, Regan? Two at a time?”

Lysander snarled.

“Elaria thinks she can steer you, but you’re determined to go your own way, aren’t you, Regan? You’re soft. You’re compromised,” Quinn spat. “You’re a traitor to highbloods everywhere. This school needs a firmer hand.”

“You mean you?” I said bluntly. “I’m sure everyone will be clamoring to have you as headmistress when they find out you orchestrated all of this.”

“It was all for the greater good. And besides, no one’s going to find out,” Quinn said, smiling. She reached into her pocket and brought out a vial. Still smiling, she threw it into the classroom we’d just come out of. I heard glass shatter, then caught the scent of blood and magic.

“She’s raising them,” Kage said quietly. “Get ready to fight.”

Quinn gestured, and the Mortis students surrounding her started to fan out to each side of the entryway stairs, preparing to come at us. Then the vestibule exploded as the front doors of Bloodwing opened and a wave of infected poured in from outside. They were clearly from Veilmar.

“The bridge must have fallen,” I whispered, terror in my veins.

“Patrols will be heading out,” Lysander said calmly. “We have a plan in place.”

There were watchers placed high up on the castle battlements; they'd have seen the infected sweep over the bridge. Avari, Orphos, and Drakharrow would be notified. Squads would sweep out around the school.

"We need to move back," Kage said grimly. "We need to retreat back to the office for now." He eyed me. "You're essential to the school. Now isn't the time to make a stand."

I hated it, but Kage was right. I wanted to stay and fight, to punish Quinn, to hold the stairs and keep the infected from spilling deeper into the school. But I was the headmistress whether I liked it or not; if I died here fighting Quinn or the infected she'd let in, then I was giving Mortis exactly what they wanted. Chaos would reign. Some other highblood would step forward to lead the school, and they wouldn't care about blightborn lives as much as my triad did.

Below us, the lower level was quickly becoming anarchy. The infected were coming in fast, snarling and shrieking as they poured through the doors. I counted at least twenty and breathed a sigh of relief. It could have been worse.

Quinn's smile had vanished as she scrambled to ward off the incoming foes. I suddenly realized she'd forgotten about the five blightborn she'd raised. They were approaching from behind her with slow, staggered steps.

"Regan." Lysander's voice was low but urgent. "Let's go. Now."

Kage's hand clamped down around my forearm. I turned away from where Quinn was being dragged down screaming, as Lysander's hand pressed against the small of my back.

"She made her choice," Kage said. "Don't feel an ounce of pity."

Behind us, Quinn was shrieking. I stepped into the hall with my triad. "I won't."

Lysander slammed the hall doors behind us and lowered the bar. We moved quickly, back through the halls in the direction of my office, which wasn't far away. Behind us echoed the sounds of screams and fighting. At least we'd had time to meet and to plan. The alarm would be spreading from tower to tower. Bloodwing was not helpless—not anymore.

I unlocked the door to the outer room, and we stepped inside. I frowned. The door to my office stood ajar. I could have sworn I'd closed it. A thin line of light streamed out from underneath. I walked toward the office. I must have forgotten to draw the curtains, and when I closed the door it must not have clicked shut. But when I looked inside, the light wasn't coming

from the windows. The curtains were drawn. It was coming from under the storage room door.

"Lysander," I murmured, knowing he'd followed me over.

"I see it."

I crossed the room and yanked open the storage room door as he covered me. But there was no one inside. The room was just as overstuffed and crowded as the last time I'd looked inside to store all of the books Rodriguez had left on his desk.

At the back of the room where objects had been draped in dustcloths, one cloth had slipped off, revealing not a tall wardrobe like I'd thought but a tall white arch. The arch was glowing, as if moonlight had been trapped in its stone.

I stopped dead in my tracks. I'd seen that arch before, in Viktor's fortress. In the room I'd been held hostage.

"Kage!" Lysander's face had gone pale. He'd turned to look behind us. "What the hell is this?"

Kage stepped up, peering over my head into the storage room. "What?"

"That." Lysander's voice was strained as he pointed.

"The arch? I spoke to Rodriguez." I could feel his eyes on me. "After we brought Regan back. We had people sent to the fortress. Rodriguez wanted anything that might prove useful one day. Anything that could help us with the Veil. I assume he put it there."

I glanced up at Lysander. His face was transfixed. He stared at the arch with a stormy intensity.

"What is it?" I asked him quietly.

"I thought it had been destroyed in the fire," he said at last.

"What is it, exactly?" Kage asked casually.

"It's a portal," Lysander said.

I turned to face the two men, looking back and forth between them. "What's going on?"

Kage was frowning. "I don't know. Lysander?"

"I saw this before. In a dream." Lysander's voice was strangled.

"The arch? If you've seen it before, why does it bother you now?" Kage asked.

"Not just the arch. This. All of this." Lysander took a deep breath. "I saw us, here, looking at the arch." He met my eyes. "I saw us pass through it," he said reluctantly.

My eyes widened. “What?”

But Lysander had closed his. “I thought this moment was a long way off. I didn’t know …”

“Didn’t know what?” Kage demanded. “Just what sort of a dream was it, Lysander?”

Lysander opened his blue eyes. “One of foresight.”

Kage looked alarmed. “What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means a dream that can’t be ignored,” Kage explained. “A prophetic dream. One that’s destined to happen.”

My hackles stood up. “That’s impossible. Nothing is destined to happen.”

Kage gave an awkward laugh. “Orphos believes differently.” He studied Lysander. “Does this have anything to do with Lunaya?”

Lysander backed away from the room. He reached my desk and leaned back against it, palms flat on the wooden surface. He looked like a man who had seen a ghost.

“Lunaya?” I stared at Lysander. “I don’t understand. Just how much do you know about what’s happening there?”

Lysander stared at me. I realized his expression wasn’t just fear. It was guilt.

“What aren’t you telling me, Lysander?” I exclaimed. I looked at Kage. He looked as out of the loop as I felt.

“I know you’ve been speaking to Lunaya at night.” Kage glanced at Lysander. “In dreams. But it’s … not always a dependable method. I know you know she’s alive. But there’s more to it than that, isn’t there? You’ve been hiding things?”

“Trying to protect you both,” Lysander gasped. “So hard.” I could see his shoulders trembling.

His sister was in danger. I tried to imagine what hearing from Persis in my dreams would do to me. I assumed what Lunaya had been put through was terrible. But then I thought of something, and before I could stop myself, the words were out. “Why haven’t you gone to her? If you knew she was alive, why are you still standing here?”

Lysander’s face broke.

“I’m sorry,” I said at once. I went to him, wrapping my arms around his waist. “I’m sorry, Lysander. I know there must be a reason for all of this. Just tell us. We’re here. We’ll understand.”

Kage had come up behind me. He was standing very close. “She’s right.”

Lysander nodded slowly. “Lunaya is alive, yes. But I can’t help her. Not in the way you think. She’s trapped. Bound to Marcus and Catherine—and to the dragon. It’s slowly killing her.” He touched my cheek gently. “Persis is there, too.”

I drew in a breath, then backed away from him. “What?”

“I didn’t know until recently. I swear, I didn’t. Lunaya … she wouldn’t let me come. She said there was no point if she couldn’t leave. All I’d have been able to do was …” He shook his head. “There are children there. Persis is one of them.”

“Is he all right? What have they been doing to him?” My heart was hammering.

“He’s alive and unharmed. Lunaya has some sort of a plan.” He closed his eyes briefly. “I was never going to leave her there. I was always going to go to her. But when I told her about my dream, we both agreed that we had to wait.”

“For this moment? For what you’d seen?” I spoke softly.

He nodded. “Yes.”

The room was filled with tension. With something else, too. The moment was significant in a way I was just beginning to comprehend. “*Thrice bound by blood,*” I whispered. I stepped into the storage room, a chill already in my veins.

“Regan.” Kage’s voice was sharp. “What are you doing?”

“What did you say?” Lysander demanded.

“Just a moment.” There was a tall bookcase in the storage room. It had already been fairly full when I’d stuffed the books I’d found on Rodriguez’s desk onto one of the shelves. I scanned my eyes over the spines, searching for the one I’d seen. “There it is.” I pulled the book down and started flipping pages. “Listen,” I said eagerly.

I read aloud, “*As the Veil grows thin, she shall approach: the woman who has crossed over and stood against the darkness. Thrice defiant and thrice bound by blood, she walks where others cannot tread …*”

When I was finished, Kage was looking a little pale, too. “Well?” I said excitedly. “It’s obvious, right?”

Kage frowned. “What’s obvious?”

“It must be about Lunaya. I found the book on Rodriguez’s desk. I think he thought it was about Medra, but Lunaya would make more sense.” I glanced at Lysander.

“I’ve heard the prophecy before,” he said quietly.

“So you agree, then?” I asked quickly. “It’s about Lunaya?”

“I think so,” he said, his voice tight.

Well, no wonder, if he believed the girl in the prophecy was his sister. Then I thought of something else. “Wait. Why did you see us going through the arch?”

“Good question,” Kage said. “We’re not leaving Bloodwing.” He glanced between us. “Are we?”

I thought of the school. Then I thought of my little brother. “Persis is at the Bonewood, with Lunaya?”

Lysander nodded. “She’s been keeping an eye on him.” His voice was strained. “I was going to tell you. Both of you. All of it—about the dream, everything. I meant to do it this morning, but then—”

“Then the plague came,” I finished. I wasn’t angry with him, I realized. He’d been carrying a huge weight. We all had been.

“What matters is that we go to Persis and Lunaya now. I can’t protect Bloodwing if I can’t protect my own brother. If you saw us going through this arch, then there must be a way to use it, right? It will take us to … where?”

“I think Viktor used it to take Florence somewhere near the Bonewood,” Lysander said heavily.

My eyes widened. “We can get Florence back, too.” Then I thought of Viktor. “Viktor is there? And Marcus, and Catherine?”

“I think so.”

“Viktor wants those dragon eggs, though. Who knows where he’s gone, or who he’s sent to get them,” Kage pointed out.

I nodded, feeling a little relieved. “True.”

“Either Marcus or Catherine has to be with Lunaya at all times,” Lysander said. “Their bond is partly based on proximity to her and the dragon. She can’t leave them, and they can’t leave her.”

“Then, maybe Viktor went after the dragon eggs himself,” I said. “Maybe he won’t even be there.” I moved deeper into the storage room, my mind made up.

“Regan! Wait,” Kage called after me, already following.

I stopped, staring at the arch. I glanced back at Lysander who stood in the doorframe. “What do we do? How do we use it?”

“We’re not using it.” Kage’s voice was desperate. “The school is under attack. Our job is to keep you safe.”

I whirled to face him. “My job is to protect my brother, then Bloodwing—in that order.” My face softened. “We are a triad. But you don’t have to do this with me.”

“Of course we do. I stand by your side,” he said firmly. He might have been frustrated with Lysander, but Kage knew we had to accept our fate. “Now, tell us how to use the arch.”

“I don’t know how it works, exactly. Something to do with blood magic, I assume, since Viktor could use it,” Lysander hedged.

“Maybe it won’t work. Then, the dream would be wrong.” Kage sounded hopeful. I wasn’t going to keep reminding him about Persis. But he must have seen my face. His own fell. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right.” I turned to study the arch. I’d passed all my blood-magic classes, but that didn’t mean I was proficient like Theo. The easiest answer was staring me in the face. I pulled a knife from the sheath in my boot and sliced my hand.

“Regan, wait,” Kage said, his voice panicked. “What if it works and you go through without us?”

“Hold my hand,” I said distractedly. I was already shoving furniture aside so I could get to the arch. “Damn Rodriguez and all his fucking clutter,” I muttered. Finally I stood before it. I’d clenched my hand into a fist, then opened it. Some drops of my blood fell to the floor. “Here goes nothing,” I said and slapped my bleeding hand against one side of the stone.

Nothing happened. The stone kept glowing steadily. But nothing changed.

Disappointment washed over me. “Fuck!” I turned to look at Lysander. “Are you sure you don’t know how it works?”

He hesitated.

“It might be keyed to Viktor’s blood,” Kage suggested. “Maybe only he can use it.” His face lit up. “Or a Drakharrow? Maybe Theo could use it? We’ll have to wait until we clear out the school. Maybe tomorrow—”

“No,” I could hear the desperation in my voice. Persis was so close. My little brother could be on the other side of the arch. I looked over at Lysander. “Lunaya is the Pure Maiden. What if she needs us to help her? You know we’re supposed to do this. We’re supposed to be able to pass through. So what’s the answer?”

Lysander hesitated, then said, “Try blood from all of us.”

I frowned. “Mixed together?”

He nodded. “Our triad is powerful. More powerful than you realize.”

“I’ve never heard of blood magic that mixes the blood of three such different houses.” I shrugged. “But what the hell.”

I held out my knife to them. Lysander took it and cut his palm. He squeezed the cut over my own bleeding palm, mixing his blood with mine. We looked at Kage. For a moment, Kage looked mutinous. Then he grabbed the knife.

“You’re both fucking insane,” he muttered.

Lysander grinned at me. I grinned back. We were doing something insane, yes. But knowing it had been foretold—that it was destiny? Well, that made me feel more hopeful. It was my destiny to save Persis. I was supposed to be doing this.

Kage dribbled some of his blood over my open palm. I turned back to the arch. “Hold my hand,” I said, suddenly nervous. “I don’t want us separated.”

“Never.” Kage clasped my left hand as I held out my right toward the arch. I looked back to see Lysander take Kage’s other hand.

“We’re with you, sweetheart,” Lysander whispered. “Now and always.”

“Now and always,” I repeated. Then I pressed my bloody palm to the stone. The archway flared to life.

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CHAPTER 56

FLORENCE



I sat on the edge of the bed because I had not been told to lie down. The room was small and clean. The blankets were soft. The floor had been recently scrubbed, though the woman who had done the scrubbing had spat at my feet when I had tried to thank her. In the corner, a tray of food was laid out beside a pitcher of water, as if I were a guest and not a prisoner.

The room seemed small yet average. There was even a small window high up on one wall. But one wall was made entirely of iron bars. And sometimes I could still hear the children crying on the other side of the dungeon.

I lifted one hand and curled my fingers. I could move—to a certain extent. I could act in ways that would do me no harm and which would keep my body alive. I could breathe, swallow, stand, and sit. But I could only speak when permitted. I could not move beyond a certain point in the room. I could not even touch the iron bars.

I could not kill myself—even if I had wanted to. And at times, I had wanted to.

There was a cold, withered soul wrapped around mine. I could feel him there, always. Viktor Drakharrow was my disease, ancient rot wrapped in a man's silken clothes. I had seen inside his mind, seen things no one should ever have to see. His memories. His desires. The violence he had carried out. The things he treasured. All of it was corruption. A life that should have ended long ago.

He was a dead thing walking, and the stench of his decay was in me now. A blackness that moved through me like oil through water. I could sense him; he was distracted. I tried not to think of Nyxaris. Viktor could enter my mind—focus on me—at any time he wished. I knew he was waiting for my

dragon to come to me. He believed the Duskdrake's arrival was a certainty. When Nyxaris arrived, Viktor would take him and use him for despicable things. And the worst part of all was that I couldn't warn him. Couldn't tell Nyxaris to stay away. Not because Viktor might stop me—though, I was sure he had a way to do so—but because I couldn't sense him. I told myself he must be too far away, and that was the one thing I should feel happy about. If Nyxaris was still too far to sense, then he was too far away for Viktor to use. Maybe he was safe.

Maybe … maybe he wouldn't come at all. Maybe he knew what had been done to me and knew the only chance of saving himself lay in staying away.

Pain suddenly lanced through my skull. I leaned forward, gasping.

I am told you have not eaten. The voice in my mind was obscene.

A pause. I felt Viktor's attention hone in on me.

You will eat. Now.

I stood up. My body moved toward the table. No, no, I didn't want to eat, I thought desperately. But I had already sat down. My hand was reaching for the spoon. I watched it in horror as it moved to the bowl of soup, dipped into it, then lifted to my mouth. The smell should have made me hungry, but as the spoon entered my mouth, I tasted nothing. I could feel no pleasure at all, not even from food. Pain was the only thing Viktor allowed me to feel.

My jaw worked—because he willed it. My throat swallowed—because he had told it to. I choked, but the food went down.

Again. The command came, yet I sensed he had grown distracted once more.

My hand moved to fetch another spoonful. Then another. I stopped with the fifth spoonful halfway to my mouth. Something was wrong. Viktor's presence jolted hard against my mind. For one moment, I felt dizzy. Then it was like a door had been opened. Sound came through. I could feel his fury.

"You will get out there, and you will hold the fucking line, do you hear me? You useless bastards!"

I'd never felt him like this before—not just furious but panicked.

"The dragon's turned rabid," someone shouted back at him.

I felt the moment Viktor ripped out the man's throat with his teeth. "Any other complaints? Get out there. Get to the dragon and subdue her. Do not kill her. Her life is worth thousands of your own."

My breath caught. The dragon? He had to mean Molindra. If Nyxaris were here, I'd sense him. Wouldn't I?

Viktor's rage continued to stream through our bond. Through him, I heard the sound of men running and shouting. Then the whole dungeon shuddered. I gasped. This wasn't the bond. The tray had rattled. The entire manor gave a groan. I dropped the spoon.

Then, more voices through the bond again. Somewhere above me in the manor, Viktor barked more orders. A woman's voice cut through.

"I'll find Catherine." I recognized Elowyn Wispwood. *"We'll find the beast and whip her within an inch of her life. Then Lunaya, too."*

Lunaya. The name hit me like cold water.

"Fine," Viktor was snarling. *"Do it. Stop the dragon. Keep it alive. Then find the girl and bring her to me. This cannot happen."*

My heart was pounding—could he sense me listening? He was too distracted to care. Lunaya was missing. Molindra was attacking the manor. I tried to control the feeling of giddiness shooting through me.

"Where are you going?" It was Elowyn's voice again.

"You dare to question me?" Viktor hissed. *"I go to check on the other animal."*

My body went cold. Did he mean Nyxaris? No, if he had my dragon I would know. Viktor would have told me—would have delighted in telling me.

The thought had hardly formed when Viktor's attention swung back to me with the speed of a serpent's strike. Pain ripped through the bond so violently I screamed. I fell sideways off the chair—not intentionally but because the tearing in my chest felt like a chain had been grabbed and yanked, flaying me from the inside out.

Please, I thought, *please*.

You dare to pry into my mind? Soon your dragon will be here. I will make him watch as I tear the clothes from your body. You will know true pain then, true suffering, as I take great pleasure in you as your dragon stands witness. Will that not be a glorious day, my Florence?

I whimpered—and I knew he heard. Then he was gone. It was quiet again, save for the sound of my own gasping breath.

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CHAPTER 57

LUNAYA



Lunaya moved quietly along the dark corridor, one hand touching the wall, the other gripping Persis's wrist. Somewhere across the house, boots thundered against floorboards and men shouted to one another in loud, frightened voices. Above their heads, a door slammed hard enough to shake dust from a pair of the tall closed velvet curtains they were passing. She felt Persis jump.

"Shhh."

Persis was breathing hard, but he didn't say a word. Then she stumbled. Despite herself, she cried out, reaching a hand up to her neck as a pulse of pain tore through her.

"Lunaya!" Persis whimpered. "What is it?"

"I'm fine," she forced herself to whisper. But the boy was already pressed up against her side, his shoulder nudging her ribs as he tried to take some of her weight, wrapping his slender arm around her waist. She shivered, hating that he had to help her.

"Your face looks—" The boy stopped himself.

"I'm fine," she whispered again. But she already knew what he'd been about to say. The black veins were spreading; they spiraled up her neck. A few had crept up to her face, crossing one cheek. She could feel them beneath her skin, at once hot and cold. These past few days, sunlight had started to hurt. She'd become grateful for all the clouds and fog.

"You're not fine," Persis hissed stubbornly. "What's happening to you?"

She forced a small smile. "We have to keep moving. Come on."

They slipped down the hall and turned into a narrower passage used only by the servants. When they reached the end, Lunaya stopped. A door stood in front of them. She knew it led to the outer yard. The servants used to

come in this way—back when they'd had homes to return to at night. Now most lived at the manor and rarely left its walls.

She hesitated, her hand poised above the latch. There was more shouting coming from behind them now. More tramping footsteps. She drew a careful breath, then pressed the latch. The door opened inward.

Outside, a man stood, waiting just beyond the threshold. He was tall and wore a hooded cloak pulled up to cover his hair and most of his face. But she knew he was highblood.

"Hurry," she whispered. He stepped quickly inside. "Catherine may sense what I've done," she said quietly. "She may be coming."

Lunaya knew her defiance was hurting Molindra just as much as it was hurting her. She also knew both of them were past the point of caring. Just a little longer. They just needed to hang on a little longer.

The man nodded. "Who's the boy?"

Persis made a small, frightened sound. Lunaya understood; this man frightened her, too. She had let something dangerous inside the manor. After this, nothing would be the same.

"His name is Persis. He's Regan Pansera's brother." Lunaya hesitated, then added, "He's going to help us with the fluffin. She trusts him."

The man's eyes widened slightly, as if he recognized the name. Then he nodded. "Take me to her," he said.

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CHAPTER 58

FLORENCE



The manor house had not stopped shaking. The long, violent tremors came every minute or two in waves that made my bed frame tremble and my tray rattle. Molindra was clearly attacking. But why? And would she stop or would the children and I wind up buried down here in rubble?

I sat on my bed, listening. Deeper in the dungeon, children were crying. Some of the voices were so high and thin that I knew they must be very young. My heart ached for them; I longed to go to them, to open their cells and take them all in my arms. I was a dragon rider. I was supposed to be brave, to be able to act. But instead, I was one of the imprisoned and helpless.

The children's crying stopped abruptly. Every muscle in my body locked up, the silence hitting harder than the tremors had. The children only went so quiet for one reason—when one of *them* was coming down. And when they came, children disappeared.

Footsteps sounded in the dark hallway outside my cell, quick and hurried.

Then Viktor Drakharrow appeared, looking foul and furious. His face had already been ravaged, but lately, it was even more wrecked-looking. Blackened veins webbed his skin, streaking down his cheeks and throat. His red eyes burned in a gaunt face carved by time and cruelty. His white hair was slicked back, and he wore a dark coat of rich black velvet, with cuffs of crimson lace. Evil could be so decadent.

His gaze moved quickly, darting around the hall, then checking my cell. His jaw was clenched with strain, but then it relaxed slightly with relief. My heart sank. Whatever he'd come to find wasn't here. And Viktor was glad. My tormentor's eyes snapped to mine. He smiled faintly. "Still here, I see."

I held very still. Was he going to open the cell? I hoped with every fiber of my being he would not. I couldn't even flinch or press myself against the wall. I couldn't ask him what he wanted. But he knew my thoughts.

His mouth curved upward cruelly. "If I wanted something from you, Florence, believe me, I would take it. You would already be on your knees."

My stomach turned.

He stepped closer to the bars. "Soon, pretty Florence. Very soon. But not yet."

He lifted a hand lazily, and pain speared through me. I gasped, my body folding in on itself. I hadn't done anything—and he knew that. He was hurting me because he was angry and because he could.

"Do not hold so fast to hope, little Florence," Viktor said coldly as I finally straightened up. "It is a wasted emotion for one such as yourself. Resign yourself to your life with me." He smiled slightly. "Who knows? Perhaps in time we will come to cherish one another."

The words were mocking. I knew love was an emotion Viktor had long since stopped allowing himself to feel.

I was still shaking as he turned away, his coat sweeping out behind him as he started back up the corridor. Then a voice came out of the shadows—not from nearby my cell, but from the other end of the hall.

"Searching for someone, Viktor?"

My breath caught.

"Who are you?" Viktor barked.

I felt terror for the man standing in the dark. Yet he did not move. That was the first thing I noticed about him—he stood firmly, feet planted with the same arrogance Viktor possessed. He wore a hood, and it shadowed his face. But I could make out the silhouette of his form. He was taller than Viktor by at least a head and solidly built.

"I asked who you were." There was a hint of confusion in Viktor's tone now. "How did you get in here? If you are a guard, you should be outside with the other men, helping to subdue that bitch dragon."

"Her name is Molindra."

Viktor had stopped in his tracks. "What did you say to me?"

"Oh, Viktor. Do you really not know me? Has age made you so forgetful?"

Viktor made a hissing sound, like the sound someone might make when blinded by the sun.

The man in the hood gave a soft chuckle. “But then, I suppose I look a little different than the last time you saw me, my old friend.”

Viktor still had not moved, but his shoulders were tense. “Enough games. You know my name. Do me the courtesy of reminding me of your own.”

The man spread out his gloved hands in a mocking gesture. “But this is so much more entertaining. It’s been such a long time since we met truly face-to-face. Long enough that you should have been grateful.”

“Grateful?” Viktor hissed.

“Grateful that you had so many years in peace before we were forced to look upon one another again.”

Their attention was so locked on one another that neither was looking my way.

Then I heard it. A tiny creak. My eyes moved to the space outside my cell. There was an alcove to the right and a door leading up to the kitchens that was used only by servants. Now it had opened about the width of a hand. A face appeared in the crack—a girl. I recognized Lunaya at once, despite the black veins that spilled over her skin. She lifted a finger to her lips for silence.

I couldn’t even nod back to say I understood. I hoped my eyes would speak for me.

She edged the door wider and slipped out. A boy followed her. He was young—perhaps eleven or twelve. He looked at me from wide, violet eyes filled with curiosity rather than fear. He was carrying something against his chest. Something small and reddish-orange. The object moved, and two large golden eyes blinked at me—a fluffin! At first, I thought it was Neville, then I realized this little creature was smaller. It had different markings than Neville’s, too, with more white around its face and neck.

Lunaya had her hand on the boy’s shoulder. She steered him toward my cell while she looked the other way, her eyes on Viktor and the man.

“You creep into my house and think yourself clever,” Viktor was saying. “You will pay a price for your insolence.”

“You are afraid, and yet you do not know why.”

“I am never afraid,” Viktor shouted.

I tensed, waiting for the pain, waiting for the glimpse into his corrupted mind. But it didn’t come. He didn’t turn to look back at me either. The man in the cloak was right—Viktor *was* afraid. So afraid he wouldn’t take the chance of turning his back on this man for even a single moment.

“You might have lived much longer, Molokhar,” the hooded man said quietly. “But you hurt one who is mine. You took something you cannot keep.”

Viktor took a step forward. “I am not a man who may be told *no*. No, not even by you, Nyxaris. You have come for the girl—finally, as I knew you would. But you are too late. She is mine in every way.” He paused, savoring the words. “All but one. I have saved that last way for your arrival. You will stand watch as I lay her bare and she trembles, naked, praying you will save her. You will watch as I lay—”

Nyxaris—for it was, of course, my dragon—moved quickly, hitting Viktor with so much force the stones cracked. He drove him up against the dungeon wall. Dust rained down from the ceiling. Viktor clawed at my dragon, a snarl on his lips. Then he turned to look to my cell.

Everything changed in his face. I watched his red eyes light up—first with fear, then fury—as he saw Lunaya and Persis standing just outside the bars of my enclosure with the fluffin. “Do not move!” he screamed at me. “Do not touch that creature. Do not let it touch you.”

But it was already too late. Persis had crouched down. He placed the fluffin gently on the floor. “Go, Nell,” I heard him whisper.

The fluffin looked up at him, eyes filled with adoration. Then she looked at me, and I saw determination. She darted in between the bars of my cell.

Nyxaris’s hands were still wrapped around Viktor’s throat, yet the highblood managed to somehow roar. “No!”

Then Viktor’s voice was in my head. Commanding me as pain drove into my skull.

Pick up something. Anything. Kill the animal. Crush it. Do it now.

My body moved. I screamed as I reached for the heavy tray on the table. I grabbed it, and the bowl and cup and plate on the tray all fell to the floor with a clatter.

The fluffin stood inside my cell, looking up at me, her eyes wide.

No, no, no. But my hand had closed around the edge of the tray, and I was lifting it.

The boy was shouting, trying to call the fluffin back out. But the little creature just stood there.

Suddenly another voice entered my mind. Not slithering in like poison but slicing in, like a blaze of morning light.

Fledgling. You will not obey him. Nyxaris's thrallweave was cutting in between Viktor's bond, strong as steel. *You will stay still. Hold still, Fireheart. That is all you must do.*

The tray rattled in my hand as my wrist shook. The pain was excruciating. My body trembled, spasming. My knees buckled, and I crashed to the floor, the tray slipping from my fingers as I cried out in agony.

I could hear shouting. In the hall, Nyxaris and Viktor were fighting. Through a haze of pain, I saw Nyxaris's cloak had fallen back from his face. He looked inhumanly beautiful—and utterly terrifying. His amber eyes burned molten in the dark. His lips had pulled back from his fangs in a predatory snarl.

"You dared to touch her." Nyxaris's voice shook with violence. "To drink from her. To bind her. When she was already *mine*." The word echoed down the hall like a roaring wave. He slammed Viktor against the wall again, wrapping his hands around the other man's throat. I heard stones crack at the collision.

Viktor gasped, then bared his own fangs in a hiss, raking his nails across Nyxaris's forearm. Nyxaris didn't flinch. He squeezed, and Viktor's face began to turn purple, the black veins popping out beneath his ravaged skin. One hand was fumbling at his belt, as if for a blade. But Nyxaris caught that wrist, smashing Viktor's hand up against the wall over his head. I saw it twist, then heard a snap. Viktor shrieked, and I heard a wet, splattering sound.

"Look at me," Nyxaris snarled. "Not her. You may never look at her again."

I sat watching from the floor of my cell, still shaking so hard my teeth chattered. Viktor's boots scraped uselessly against the stone. I could see blood running from the back of his head where Nyxaris had smashed him against the wall.

The pain hadn't stopped—if anything now I was feeling Viktor's, too.

"Come back, Nell!" The boy pleaded, his voice shrill with panic. "Lunaya, call her back. She's going to hurt her."

"No." The Orphos girl's voice was fierce despite how weak she looked. "Leave her, Persis. Nell must stay there."

"She'll die!"

Nell. That was her name. The little fluffin was ignoring them both. She stood just a few feet from me, her tiny body braced, huge ears pricked forward. She looked at me in that way Neville always had—with impossible stubbornness, as if she had already come to a decision and there was no point arguing.

Around us, the manor house shook. Dust drifted down from the ceiling as somewhere up above something huge hit the house. In the distance, I could hear the children crying and calling out again.

I was useless. My whole body trembled with pain. But at least I hadn't hurt the fluffin.

Nell came closer. She raised her front legs and planted two tiny paws on my knees gently, looking up with huge, glowing eyes. She opened her mouth, and I saw a little pink tongue. For a moment, I expected her to lick me.

A sound ripped through the hallway. Nyxaris cried out. My head jerked.

Another figure had appeared out of the dark behind him. A half-born woman, her pale hair pinned up in a high bun. Elowyn Wisp-wood's face was driven as she buried the hilt of a knife in Nyxaris's back. Nyxaris's grip on Viktor broke. Viktor slid to the ground, one hand to his throat. My former professor of magic pulled her knife free and took a step back, clearly waiting for Nyxaris to fall.

Everything happened at once.

Nyxaris staggered, then spun. He moved with incredible speed, even though wounded. Elowyn's hand was rising again. She drove the knife down toward Nyxaris's face.

Nell's mouth was still open. She began to sing. It was a faint sound, and yet it somehow filled the whole cell. A pure, high note, impossibly sweet and clear.

Viktor's head snapped toward me. "No," he cried, horror spreading across his face. He began to crawl toward my cell.

But it was too late. The fluffin's paws were light on my knees, barely a whisper of weight. The small creature's fur brushed my skin. She was singing, her voice high and shrill and sweet—otherworldly and full of magic. The sound went straight through me. My breath hitched. There, inside my chest. The wrongness which was not *me* began to buckle and crumble like rotting wood. Viktor. His presence. His thoughts, his cruelty.

The fluffin nudged my hand with her wet nose. Something tore. Like a stitch being yanked free from flesh. I couldn't speak, couldn't scream. It was pain and not-pain; it was relief.

I sensed Viktor recoiling from the purity of the fluffin's power. She was everything good. Everything he could never be. Her mysterious magic was a power he could never hope to compete with. For the first time I understood the power these small creatures truly possessed and the threat they had always posed to highbloods.

Viktor's rage tried to rise, to seize me with pain like he'd always been able to do before.

He couldn't.

The collar had cracked; Nell was doing that. I felt the last of Viktor's grip slide off me. Joy filled me, pure and overwhelming.

On the floor nearby us, Viktor lay writhing in pain. The pain I'd felt being bound to that monster was now being paid back to him tenfold.

Nell's song swelled one last time, then stopped. I leaned down and wrapped my hands gently around the fluffin, lifting her up very carefully. She was warm and wriggling beneath my palms, just a pup after all. I stroked her head, and she purred. I felt myself smiling.

Lunaya and Persis looked at me hopefully. Viktor had come to, and Elowyn still wasn't letting up on Nyxaris. So many more people needed saving, but as I looked into the fluffin's owlish eyes, I was sure of one thing: Viktor no longer had control over me.

The fluffin looked up at me, her eyes wide and curious. Did she understand the depths of the evil from which she had just saved me?

It didn't matter, really. Because in my mind, Viktor's presence was gone. For the first time since I'd been bound, I spoke without his permission.

"Thank you," I whispered.

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CHAPTER 59

REGAN



The darkness had taken us whole. One moment, I was standing in the storage room with my hand pressed to the cold stone. The next I'd approached the shimmer that had suddenly bloomed within the arch. I'd walked up to it and fallen through, like someone vanishing between cracks of ice on a frozen lake. It felt like falling, like being pulled through cold water. A roaring filled my head, too wrong to be the wind. I stumbled, gasping, letting go of Kage's hand and sinking down on my knees as we came through the other side. My vision swam, and for a few horrible seconds I wasn't sure if I was up or down. I blinked, fighting back waves of nausea, and slowly the world began to take shape.

We were in a stone-walled room. The air was damp and tasted of earth and mildew—underground, then. The room reminded me of a cellar. We weren't alone. Two figures stood on the far side of the room, a man and a woman, shock written all over their faces.

I blinked, dizzy and disoriented, trying to hold back my bile. Behind me, I could hear Kage making retching noises.

The man moved first. He wore a red-and-black guard's uniform—Drakharrow colors. It took a moment for my mind to comprehend what he'd said to the woman: "He told us to kill anyone who came through it."

He was going to kill us. I tried to react but my body felt cold and slow. My head was still spinning. Behind me, I felt Lysander swaying. Kage mumbled curses under his breath. The room had filled with the stench of vomit.

The guard drew his blade. Everything was happening too fast. He rushed at me.

I tried to move, but my body wouldn't catch up with my mind. I caught a gleam of steal as the guard angled his weapon down toward my throat, and my mouth opened to gasp—

Then the woman threw herself between us, just a moment before Kage and Lysander surged into motion.

Kage hit the guard heavily from the side like a battering ram, one arm hooked around the other man's neck. They both went down together, smashing into a stack of wooden crates, and I saw the guard's steel fall. Lysander had recovered quickly. He had a knife in his hand. He darted in fast, stabbing once, twice. There was a cry, then a gurgle, and a spray of blood. I hardly saw it all—for the woman had fallen backward onto me. I tried to catch her, wrapping my hands around her waist. I fell back, thankfully hitting the wall and not the arch, with her weight in my arms. Warmth spilled over my hands. *Blood.*

"No, no," I heard myself saying.

The woman stared up at me, her eyes wide. She looked familiar. I knew her. Theo Drakharrow's light gray eyes looked back up at me.

"Aryel! What are you doing here? Where are we?"

"North," she breathed. "O'Rourke estate. Near … the Bone-wood."

I felt dizzy again but this time with relief. We'd made it.

Aryel's blood was everywhere—running over my hands, soaking into my sleeves, spreading warmth across my lap as I tried to keep her upright. Kage and Lysander were both there, I realized. Kage crouched beside me while Lysander stood nearby. They didn't speak.

"Aryel. My brother. Is Persis here?"

She blinked slowly. "Yes. I've seen him … wandering the house. They let him move … more than the others."

I frowned. "Others? What others?"

Aryel closed her eyes. Lysander had yanked off his coat. He knelt down and pressed it over Aryel's stomach. Her eyes opened, and she gasped.

"We'll get you help," I promised her. "Stay awake."

She exhaled. "There is no help here. Only death."

A chill passed over me. "What do you mean?" I looked up at Lysander. "Can we … ?"

But his face told me a truth I didn't want to know. There was so much blood. Too much. Aryel's mouth trembled. "Viktor … he brought me here. I

was tending the children. But … I couldn’t stop them. They kept taking them away.”

“What were they doing with the children?”

“Sacrifices,” she whispered, “to use against the Veil.”

The darkest kind of blood magic. For a second I forgot how to breathe, imagining how they would have soon used Persis.

Aryel clutched at my hand weakly. “I’m glad.”

“Glad?”

“Glad someone will stop them.” She exhaled, and I heard a gurgle in her throat. Blood trickled from her mouth. “Better to be out of it now. But—” she was speaking so softly I nearly didn’t hear “—I’ll miss Theo.”

She fumbled with her hands, touching the pocket of her dress. “Take the keys.”

Kage moved, gently touching her pocket and lifting out a heavy ring of iron keys. The manor house suddenly gave a great shuddering lurch.

“What the fuck was that?” Kage demanded.

“The dragon,” Aryel whispered.

I glanced at my mates. Which dragon?

Aryel’s hand touched mine again. “Tell Theo … tell him I loved him.”

My eyes burned. “I will. I promise.”

“Tell him he deserved … a better mother.” Her eyes were fluttering. “And a better father.”

I didn’t understand what she meant, but I knew it didn’t matter. “I’ll tell him,” I said, my voice cracking. “I’ll tell him you loved him. I’ll tell him how you saved us.”

Her fingers relaxed. The room was still. One moment, Aryel’s eyes were on mine. The next, there was nothing in them. She was gone. For a second, I just sat there, holding her body.

Kage touched my shoulder, his hand heavy but gentle. “Let us help you.” He and Lysander lifted Aryel carefully and laid her respectfully to the side. Lysander found a coarse blanket in one of the broken crates and placed it over her. I stared at the blanket.

Lysander crouched in front of me. “Regan, are you hurt?”

I stared at him. “What?”

“You’re covered in blood,” Kage pointed out. “Did that man—?”

I shook my head. “It’s all Aryel’s.” I tried to stand. Lysander gently grasped my wrists, lifting me. Kage circled us, checking me over despite

what I'd said, searching for cuts. I wiped my bloodied hands on my skirt. "We don't have time for this." I looked at the key ring. "Persis is here. Other children, too. We have to help them."

The manor house seemed to answer with a shudder and groan.

"This house could come down around us," Lysander said quietly.

Kage nodded, his expression suddenly soldierlike. "All right. We move together."

Lysander handed me the ring of keys. The iron felt cold against my palm. I took one last look at Aryel. One moment she'd been alive. The next she'd been gone. "I'll tell your son," I whispered. Then I squeezed the ring of keys, and our triad walked out into the shaking house.



We turned a corner, and they were there. Coming toward us in an impossible, strange little procession. My little brother walked in front, his eyes wide and wild, and he was holding something to his chest. My heart sped up as I realized it was a fluffin. Behind him walked Lunaya. She had her arm around Florence Shen, supporting the girl. And at the rear walked a tall handsome highblood man I'd never seen before. His face was grim. Blood darkened his shirt. Behind them, the body of a highblood woman lay crumpled in the hall.

"Persis," I heard myself say. My voice broke on his name.

His eyes found mine and grew even huger. "Regan!" He ran to me.

He was still cradling the fluffin, so I dropped to my knees, wrapping my arms around him as hard as I could without squishing the little creature he carried. I closed my eyes. He was here. He was alive. I heard a tiny chirp and opened my eyes just in time to see the fluffin wriggling in Persis's arms.

He gave me an apologetic look. "She doesn't like to be held too much."

I smiled. "Is she yours?"

"She's … no one's," he said. "She's her own." He looked up at me. "Regan, is it really you?"

I gave a choking laugh. "It's me. I've been so worried about you."

"I thought Father would come," Persis said, his voice low. "But then … he didn't. No one did."

A lump formed in my throat. “He probably didn’t know where to look. I’m sure he’s worried about you, too.” My father and I would be having strong words soon, I decided. I glanced at the others. Lysander was standing near his sister, a hand pressed gently to her arm. They were speaking in low voices.

Lunaya looked very much changed. Black veins spread across her throat and up one side of her face. Her lips were pale and bloodless. She looked as if she were standing through sheer stubbornness alone. I glanced at Lysander. But his face was calm. He must have been expecting this.

“Regan,” Lunaya said, noticing me watching her. “Do you have the keys?” Her expression was as serene as her brother’s, but her voice was strained, and her breathing was shallow.

I stared at her, Persis still in my arms, the fluffin nudging at my leg. “Keys?” Her eyes dropped to my hand. Then I remembered—the keys Aryel had given me were still clutched in my fist. I held them out to her, and she nodded.

“Good. We’ll open the cells. We need to move quickly.”

As if echoing her sentiments, the house groaned and shifted. The sound of screams and shouts came from above. Kage was speaking to the highblood man. I looked over at them curiously.

As if he felt my eyes on him, Kage turned. His eyes met mine and he smiled. “Regan, this is Nyxaris.”

My eyes widened. “The … dragon?” I cleared my throat. “Pleased to meet you.”

Nyxaris looked pale but fierce. He had blood smeared across his jaw. “Viktor is wounded,” he said flatly. “But still alive. I’m going after him.” He met my eyes, and I realized that to him, this wasn’t our first meeting. “Viktor’s been up to his old tricks—an amulet with old fae magic. He vanished from beneath me.”

I thought of how Viktor had seemed to disappear into thin air that day in my office when Nyxaris had been attacking. He’d refused to tell me how he’d done it. He’d never apologized for leaving me behind either.

“Like the arch we came through?” Kage asked.

Nyxaris nodded. “Similar to that, but with a much shorter range, I think.” His mouth curled in a murderous smile. “He was running, but he won’t be far.” Kage’s gaze moved to Florence, then to me and the ring of keys in my

hand. Nyxaris followed the look. “I’m going after Viktor. Florence must stay with you. Get the children out.”

“No.” It was the first time she’d spoken. Florence’s voice was rough with desperation. “I want to go with you.”

Kage ignored her. “We’ll watch over her, and Regan, and Lunaya. We’ll find the little ones and get them out.” His eyes briefly met mine, then rested on Lunaya and Persis. “Then Lysander and I will find you.”

Nyxaris gave a tight nod. I decided this wasn’t time to argue with their stupid plan. I would be following part of it, but not all of it. I wasn’t going anywhere, not even back to Bloodwing with my brother. Not yet.

“Nyxaris, no.” Florence made a broken sound that made me wonder just what she’d been through. “I’m not leaving you again. Please.”

Nyxaris looked at her, and the corridor seemed to shrink to just the two of them. He crossed to her in a single stride and cupped her face with both his hands so gently it made my throat ache. “I did not come all this way, Fledgling,” he said, his voice a low rumble, “to lose you again. You have only just returned to me.”

“I don’t want to hide anymore,” she whispered. “Let me help you.”

“You are not hiding,” he murmured, pressing his forehead against hers. “You are surviving.” He looked down at her, and I saw there was no softness to him—except in the way he touched her. “I must finish this once and for all. Do you understand?”

She nodded slowly. But as he turned away, Florence met my eyes. She was not going back. And neither was I. Nyxaris didn’t stick around to argue with his rider; he was already moving with highblood speed, slipping down the corridor and vanishing into the dark.

“Come on,” Lunaya said, waking us all up. “This way. Quickly.”

The level below the manor house was even more awful than I’d realized. We moved into a low vaulted chamber. Along the sides were barred rooms that stank of blood, fear, and stale bodies packed together with too little fresh air. The keys shook in my hands as I worked through the ring, unlocking door after door. Finally, Kage took the ring gently from my hand.

When all the cells had been opened, about fifteen children encircled us. They looked tired and filthy and far too thin.

“Not all of them are coming out,” Persis announced.

We followed his gaze. Inside one of the open cells, three children lay on the ground. They looked up at us with blank eyes, too gaunt and weary to

even move. Kage swore under his breath. Then he strode into the cell and gently lifted two of the children up. Lysander moved in for the other, tucking a little boy against his shoulder with a soft murmur of reassurance. I saw his eyes were murderous in that quiet Orphos way.

Persis tugged at my sleeve. “There’s another one here.”

The fluffin darted forward, running into a dark cell. I walked slowly after her. Inside, a little girl with cropped dark hair and a split lip sat huddled in the corner, her arms wrapped around her knees.

In the end, everyone was carrying a child except for Lunaya and Florence who walked side by side and hand in hand with two of the children. Even Persis carried a small boy in his arms, high-blood and thin as a bird, with a hand clamped over his mouth as if he was still trying not to make a sound. I smiled at the little boy reassuringly from where I walked behind them. He looked back at me with huge, haunted eyes.

Above us the house shook again. Lunaya staggered. Florence was quick to wrap her arm around the other girl’s waist. The shudders were coming less often.

“This way,” Lunaya said, her voice sounding strained. She’d led us back to the room with the arch. The white stone door was still glowing; it looked bright and unnatural against the damp wall. Some of the children stared at it with wide eyes.

I shifted the girl I held higher in my arms and looked at Lysander’s sister. “Lunaya, will you take them through?”

She gave me a sweet smile full of regret. The expression made her look for one heartbreaking instant like the dreamy girl I used to see walking Bloodwing’s halls. “I can’t,” she said. “I must go last.”

I didn’t want to argue with her. I looked at Florence. She was already shaking her head. “No. I’m staying. Nyxaris doesn’t know everything. Once Viktor is …” She swallowed hard, looking between me, Kage, and Lysander. “Nyxaris will need to know all of it. I’m staying.” Her voice was firm.

I looked at my brother, hesitating. We’d left Bloodwing in chaos. We couldn’t send the children back alone.

Lunaya touched my arm. “Regan, don’t fear for them.” She looked from me to Persis and then to the children who’d formed a cluster near the arch. “I’ve seen this moment. If we managed to get them this far, then they’ll be safe on the other side.”

I stared at her, not quite willing to believe.

"Theo is waiting there," she said simply.

My throat tightened. I carefully set down the little girl in my arms. She grabbed onto Persis's sleeve, looking up at him as if she knew him already. Persis stared up at me, his face grave.

I crouched beside him. "Listen to me," I said, my voice wobbling. "You have to be brave now."

He straightened up, and I knew he was trying hard to look older than he was. I bit my lip, trying not to lose control. "I am brave," he declared.

I smiled. Tears burned in the corners of my eyes. I blinked them back. "I know you are." I touched his cheek. "I am so glad I found you, Persis. I'm so glad you're safe."

"Can I take Nell?" he asked suddenly. I saw he was looking across the room. Florence sat down on an overturned crate, and the little fluffin had taken up a place by the girl's feet.

I swallowed. "I think Nell may still have more work here to do."

I expected him to cry, to protest. But instead, he just nodded. "All right."

"You need to lead everyone through," I told him. "Do you think you can do that?"

He nodded again. "I can do it."

"You're going to get them to safety. Just like a hero in one of your books."

His eyes lit up a little at that. "Like Sir Prancelot."

I laughed. "Wasn't he a horse?"

"A talking horse, yes. And a noble knight."

"All right, fine. Be like Sir Prancelot."

Persis looked around at the children. "I think we should all hold hands." He raised his voice a little. "Listen to me. Everyone take someone else's hand. See to the little ones."

Lunaya and Lysander stepped in, helping to organize the children with gentle words and soft touches. Soon the children had formed a chain, every small hand in someone else's with Persis leading at the front.

There were no tears. No fearful protests. They looked beyond tears, most of them. Around us the manor shook again, reminding us of the dangers that still lay above our heads. Persis had a little boy in his arms, while an older girl clutched his sleeve.

“Someone will be waiting for you on the other side,” I said, trying to make my voice sound firm and confident. “His name is Theo. Tell him who you are, and he’ll help you. Listen to him.”

“Be strong,” Persis told the children. “It’s only a step. Just one little step.” He turned toward the glowing arch, the children linked behind him in a fragile chain, and led them into the light.

Lunaya waited until the last of the children had vanished, then she turned to Lysander.

The prophecy. I’d nearly forgotten. “The Pure Maiden,” I blurted out. “Of course! You couldn’t go because of the prophecy.” Lunaya and Lysander looked at me strangely. “Lysander,” I said, “tell her.”

But he didn’t speak. I looked at Lunaya—at the black veins weaving across her skin, at the way she seemed to be just barely holding herself upright.

She smiled sadly. “No, Regan,” she said gently. “I’m not the Pure Maiden.”

“But I thought …” I looked at Lysander in confusion.

Lunaya gestured to herself. “The corruption began to fill me the moment Catherine raised Molindra from the dead. Marcus had bound me to himself with blood magic long before that.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. If it wasn’t Lunaya, then Rodriguez must have been right. It was Medra.

Lunaya had turned back to her brother. “I’m happy for you,” she said quietly. “For all of you.”

Lysander’s careful composure shattered in an instant. I watched him fall apart, knowing I needed to hold back. A sob left his throat, and then his whole body shuddered. Kage made a sound, and his hand twitched at his side. I knew he was feeling what I felt. I moved to stand next to him, and he wrapped his arms around me.

“Lunaya,” Lysander whispered.

And then I finally understood. They were saying goodbye.

Lunaya’s smile was radiant and calm. “I’m sorry to die without ever falling in love. But I’m glad you had the chance. I’m glad you found it.” Her eyes went to Kage, then to me. “I never felt that kind of love, but I had the chance to love in other ways.”

Lysander was crying openly now, tears streaming down his face.

His sister touched one of his cheeks, then stood up on tiptoe to press a kiss to his other. “Brother, you are the greatest love I have ever known. I will miss seeing you in my dreams.”

Then she turned and stepped into the arch—before we could move to stop her. I waited for her to vanish into the light. But instead, she came apart. For a moment, she was a dark silhouette—and above us, somewhere high over the manor, we heard a wordless roar. Then she crumbled, soundlessly. A pale cloud of ash fell through the arch and onto the floor.

Lysander made a terrible wordless sound and sank to his knees. I moved just as Kage did. We reached him, folded ourselves around him, holding him as he shook with sorrow.

Above us, the house had gone quiet.

Lunaya had known. She had held on through pain and corruption and terrible bondage long enough to help others. She’d saved Persis, Florence, and the children. She’d waited to see her brother one last time. And then she had taken herself and her dragon out of evil’s reach forever.

I looked at the pile of ash. Lunaya had won. And the ones who had done this to her? They were about to lose.

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CHAPTER 60

MEDRA



I woke with a pounding heart to the sound of my mother's voice calling my name. For one confused second, I thought Orcades was in the tent with us. I lay very still in the darkness, listening. But the call didn't come again. Beside me, Blake was a warm, solid shape, his breathing deep and even. I carefully slid his arm off me and sat up.

Outside, the camp was quiet. There was nothing wrong, nothing obvious, but my heart would not stop hammering. I touched a hand to my chest—and then it hit me. A terrible, wordless void burned in my heart.

Orcades was gone. I didn't know how I knew it, but I did.

My breath caught in my throat as I reached for a heavy jacket and pulled back the tent flap. My mother's spirit hadn't been inside me, we communicated only through dreams. And yet I knew. The fragile thread that had been hanging between us was gone.

"Pendragon?" Blake mumbled.

"It's all right," I made myself murmur, hoping he would be too sleepy to pick up on the distress in my voice. "Go back to sleep."

He mumbled something I couldn't make out, then flipped onto his stomach and shifted deeper into the blankets. I crawled out of the tent, grabbing my boots and yanking them on as I stood up. We'd set up our camp under an overhang of rock. For being underground, it was practically cozy. Pale, bioluminescent mushrooms grew along the wall in clusters. Beyond the overhang, the dwarven sky gave off that same diffuse glow of an ever-present false dawn.

The rest of the camp was asleep. Well, most of it. Someone was in the midst of the circle of tents. Rodriguez was pacing, walking a few steps one way, then back again. He dragged his hands through his hair, muttered

something I couldn’t hear, and then turned around and saw me. Relief broke across his face.

I walked over to him slowly, pulling my coat around me. “What is it?”

“I was just about to wake you,” he whispered. He glanced back at my tent. “But …”

He didn’t want to wake up Blake. My guard went up. “What’s wrong?”

He tugged at my sleeve. “Not here. Come over here. Quietly.”

I followed him to the edge of camp. His hands, I realized, were shaking. “What’s going on?” I asked sharply. “Tell me. Now.”

He took a breath, then looked around to make sure no one else was stirring. “We have a huge fucking problem.”

“What?” I demanded. “What’s the problem?”

“Someone is missing,” he said bluntly. “A member of our party.”

My pulse raced. “Who is missing, Rodriguez?”

“The fluffin,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“Neville? What happened?” I glanced over at Hawl’s tent.

“Medra.” Rodriguez swallowed. “House Mortis must have been watching us. They took him.” He looked around nervously. Now I understood his paranoia.

“Did you see it happen?” I demanded.

He shook his head. “No. They must have grabbed him when he was wandering around.”

The fluffin was fearless. He also enjoyed exploring. It was normal for him to disappear from camp for a little while, then to come racing back—looking for food, cuddles, and a cozy place to sleep. Usually inside Hawl’s tent.

My mind was already jumping ahead. “We have to wake everyone up. We’ll go after him.” I started to move.

Rodriguez grabbed my arm. “Wait.” He did not look any less anxious. If anything, he looked worse. “They left a note.” Wordlessly, he handed over a folded piece of parchment. My name was written on the outside. “They left it outside your tent.”

I scanned it, my anger rising. It was from Silvio.

We want the rider. Send her to us and the creature won’t be harmed. She must come alone or we’ll destroy the animal. No tricks.
–SS.

I let out a disbelieving snort. “This is insane. Of course I’m not going alone. We need to wake everyone up. What were you waiting for?” I thrust the note back at him. “Why didn’t you tell me as soon as you found this? They aren’t going to kill Neville. They don’t have a fluffin. They need him as much as we do. They must have finally realized it,” I said grimly. “Obviously we’re not doing as Silvio wants. We’ll attack them. We’ll get Neville back.”

I chewed my lip. Neville might be injured if we did this, but we had no other choice. Silvio was not going to just make a simple exchange. He had to know we’d show up en masse: He wasn’t a complete idiot. Mortis would be preparing for us right now. I thought of something. Had they gotten past the last ward? Had they reached the egg vault? “We’ll have to prepare for anything. Everything,” I said, starting to turn away.

“Medra, wait.” Rodriguez still looked like he was going to puke.

I narrowed my eyes. “What are you not saying?”

He rubbed a hand over his mouth. “Hawl saw the note first. Not me.”

My blood went cold. “No.”

“I couldn’t stop them,” he said desperately. “You know how they are. And when they found out Neville was gone …”

“Shit,” I said. Now we really did have a problem. Mortis might not kill Neville, but they wouldn’t hesitate to kill Hawl. My heart was sinking. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“What should we do?” Rodriguez asked.

“Is this it, then? Is this the prophecy?”

“What?” He stared at me, then shook his head, looking frustrated and sad at the same time. “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

Part of me wanted to be furious that for once he didn’t have all the answers. But that wasn’t fair. He wasn’t infallible. He was just doing his best, like I was.

“I’m going after them,” I said.

His eyes widened. “You can’t. Blake.”

“Oh, you’re worried about Blake, are you?” I snapped. “Well, my friend is out there. Mortis could kill Hawl at any time. What other choice do we have now?”

Rodriguez took a deep breath. “I wasn’t thinking. Now that I am … We can’t rush in without a plan. I think this is a bad idea. You were right the first time—we need to wake everyone up.”

“It’s too late for a plan,” I said mercilessly. “They told me to come alone, so that’s where we’ll start. They have Neville *and* Hawl—and they *will* kill Hawl, Rodriguez. I’m not going to let that happen.” I swallowed. “Even if they take me captive. The main thing is that Hawl and Neville get out.”

“They aren’t just going to hand over the fluffin,” Rodriguez pointed out.

“No, but I can at least exchange myself for Hawl, and then you can all do whatever you want. I’ll try to keep Neville safe. They won’t hurt me.” Well, they would. But I wasn’t going to think about that part right now.

At least Rodriguez had done one thing right: I’d been completely distracted from thinking about Orcades.

I hesitated. “By the way, I think Molindra is dead.”

Rodriguez’s eyes widened. “How do you know that?”

“I just do,” I hedged. “You can tell the others when you wake them up—after I’ve left. I need a head start.” Then I looked at him, thinking more carefully. He was already looking nervously back at my tent where Blake was still sleeping. I groaned, knowing exactly what he’d do as soon as I was out of sight. “I’m sorry, Rodriguez. But I have to do this.”

He didn’t look at me. “I know. I understand.”

“No,” I said flatly. “Not just that. This.”

And then I decked him.

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CHAPTER 61

BLAKE



I woke to someone shaking my leg. With a growl, I reached for the knife I slept with under my bedroll. Then I recognized the face peering into the tent. “Rodriguez? What the fuck?” I was still groggy, so it took me a second to realize Pendragon wasn’t in the tent with me. Once I did, I was fully awake. I stared at the open tent flap. Rodriguez had a hand to his head, holding something in place. It looked like a cold compress. “What happened to your head?”

“Funny you should ask that.” He glanced down at Pendragon’s empty spot, and his face paled. “Get up. We need to talk.”

“Where is she?” I snarled.

“Just get up, Blake.”

I threw back the blankets as memory crashed into place. I remembered Pendragon leaving the tent in the night. I thought she’d just been going to the bathroom. Now I realized something, and my heart kicked into high gear. I didn’t think she had come back. I yanked on trousers and was pulling a shirt over my head as I emerged into the camp. Everyone was getting up.

Visha had already made a fire and was preparing a pot of kava. She glanced at me. “Rodriguez seems to have drunk a little too much last night. I found him sprawled out here on the ground.”

“I don’t have a fucking hangover,” Rodriguez snapped, still holding the compress to his head. “Medra hit me.”

“Now, why would she do something like that?” I sauntered over to him, my voice dangerously low.

He flinched as I stuck my face close to his. “She didn’t want me to wake you up.”

I don’t know what I’d been expecting him to say, but it wasn’t that. “What the fuck does that mean?” I demanded. “Where is she?”

“Look, I just came to, all right? I woke you as soon as I was conscious.”

He was obviously hoping I wasn’t going to hit him again. I bared my fangs. “Where is she? Talk. Now.”

“She’s gone,” Rodriguez said, his voice hardly a whisper. “She went to find House Mortis.”

The camp went very still. “Why would she do that? Is she insane?” It was Zaira. She’d been wearing a sleeping cap over her long black braids. Now I saw her drop it to the ground as if she’d forgotten she’d been holding it.

“Mortis left a note.” Rodriguez handed it to me.

I scanned it. Visha was already at my side. When I was through, she grabbed it and read it aloud.

“You’re telling me Medra Pendragon was stupid enough to walk right into a Mortis trap?” Sankara rumbled.

“Where’s Hawl?” It was Kazmyn.

Visha was scanning the camp. “Shit. Who found the note?”

“Hawl found the note,” Rodriguez said weakly. “They were already gone by the time I found it. I woke up Pendragon, and then …”

There was quiet as everyone put the pieces together. “Maybe Pendragon caught up with the Bearkin,” Kazmyn suggested.

“I doubt it. More likely Mortis had people waiting nearby,” Sankara said slowly. “Waiting for whoever was—” he glanced at me “—brave enough to leave the camp,” he finished tactfully.

I took a deep breath. This was not good.

Visha was shaking her head in frustration. “We’re idiots. We knew they needed Neville.”

“Yes, but I thought they’d be waiting to ambush us farther ahead,” Rodriguez said quietly. “Not that they’d backtrack to get him and risk being attacked.”

“Why did they want Medra in the first place?” Professor Stonefist asked suddenly. “They asked for the rider. We know they need the fluffin’s blood. Why not just keep the fluffin and move forward?”

“Zaira,” Kazmyn said. Just his sister’s name. That was all.

I glanced at the Stone Keeper. She was standing rigid, her hands clenched at her sides.

I narrowed my eyes. “Zaira?” She didn’t reply. “Kaz,” I said softly. “What is she not telling us?”

Kazmyn shifted nervously. “I’m not sure.” He glanced between his sister and me, then blurted, “I think there’s something she’s been hiding.”

“Kazmyn,” Zaira said, her voice sharp and angry, “you know nothing. Silence yourself.”

My blood burned. I drew my knife. “You’d better start talking fast or you’re not going to like what happens next.”

“You’re threatening a defenseless woman?” Sankara demanded, frowning.

“He’s not threatening her. I am.” Visha slid behind Zaira, a dagger already in her palm. “Talk, Stone Keeper. Now. Or things are going to get messy.”

Kazmyn looked uneasy, but it was telling that he didn’t object. And it made me even more worried. “Zaira, please. Whatever it is, just tell them.”

Zaira exhaled. “We are in a terrible predicament.”

“Why? What do you mean?” I snapped.

She met my gaze. “It is not dragon’s blood we require to access the vault.”

I lifted my knife and hurled it. Zaira gasped. Kazmyn yelled. The knife landed smack in the center of one side of the Stone Keeper’s tent, rending the canvas in a wide slit.

“You want me to kill her?” Visha asked bluntly.

I shook my head. “We still need her blood.” I glowered at the dwarven woman. “You lied to us from the start.”

She swallowed. “I did not think Lord Sharma would tell them.”

“Mortis has been dismembering the man piece by piece, and yet you thought he’d keep his lips sealed?” Magda Stonefist shook her head. “Oh, Stone Keeper.”

I took a slow step toward Zaira. “You let us walk in here, with her, knowing that.”

Rodriguez looked like he was going to be sick. “I don’t understand. We don’t need dragon’s blood?”

“The dwarves were not fools,” Zaira snapped. “When the vault was designed, the Emberwatch and the Stone Keepers knew a full-grown dragon from the surface might not be able to come below. Not all dragons are like —” her eyes flicked to me “—him.”

“A rider was easier,” Kazmyn murmured. “It makes sense—we need dragon *rider* blood.”

“Why would you omit this?” Sankara demanded, folding his arms over his barrel chest.

“Lord Sharma and I believed it was too dangerous a detail. The fewer who knew, the better.” She looked at me. “Besides, a dragon’s bond to his rider is strong, and when they are mated, the dragon is compromised.”

“Compromised?” I exploded. “I’ll show you fucking *compromised*.”

“You see?” she said, with infuriating complacency, as if she’d decided I wasn’t going to kill her. “He is too passionate. Too hot-headed.”

“My rider is gone,” I snarled. “I did not protect her. How does that fit into your little equation?”

She closed her eyes briefly. “You are right.”

I’d been planning to tell Visha to start cutting, but now I paused, unable to believe the stubborn keeper had actually said the words. “And?”

She drew a breath. “And I am sorry. I made a mistake.”

Kazmyn looked at me. “I think that was her first apology. Ever.”

“I don’t fucking care,” I snapped, my rage returning. “Pendragon is gone.” I turned and began stalking toward my tent, already thinking of the gear I’d need and what I could leave behind.

“Blake,” Sankara called. “We need a plan.”

I whirled. “The plan is I go get my girl.”

“Sankara is right,” Visha said. “Think, Blake, don’t just be reckless. You need us. You’re not attacking Mortis alone.” She moved closer to me, blade tucked away again. “Let’s go and make Silvio Santos wish he’d never been born.”

Her words cut through the red haze of rage. I knew she was right. I took a deep breath. “All right.”

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CHAPTER 62

MEDRA



By the time Gretchen shoved me inside Silvio Santos's tent, I was furious. With her, Silvio, and all of House Mortis. But especially with myself.

Silvio's tent was bigger than any of the ones we'd brought. Probably because he was using his people as his pack mules. He had enough room to stand and move around. A lantern hung from a pole in the center, and he had an actual cot to sleep on. He also had a table—covered with maps and notes. He stood in the middle of the tent, arms crossed, grinning like he'd just been handed a present.

"Wipe that look off your face," I snapped, fidgeting against the rope restraining my wrists. "Where are my friends?"

"Well, well, well," he drawled. "Welcome to Camp Mortis. Honestly, Pendragon, I'm a little surprised to see you. I didn't think you'd be stupid enough to come."

I glared at him, but really, I'd been thinking the same thing. What else could I have done, though? They'd said to come alone, which meant they must have had a plan to kill Neville or at least Hawl if we dared to attack first.

I lifted my chin. "Where are Hawl and Neville? Are they safe?"

"Hawl?" Silvio scratched his chin.

"The giant armored bear." I'd already seen the damage Hawl had done to the Mortis camp. "Didn't bargain for Hawl when you took our fluffin, did you, asshole?"

"So Neville is … ?" Silvio gave a barking laugh. "Oh shit. You gave the thing a name?" I didn't answer. He took a step closer, looking me up and

down in that lascivious way he had. “Of course the fluffin is safe. We need it.”

“And Hawl?”

He ignored me, which wasn’t a good sign. “In fact, I’d say that little furry ball of fluff is the most valuable thing here.” His gaze slid over my face. “Well. Second-most valuable.”

A chill went through me. “You said this was an exchange. Neville for me.” Obviously that wasn’t going to happen; they weren’t going to let Neville go. I figured they’d let Hawl go, though. I’d stay with Neville, and Hawl could go back to Blake. They’d regroup and attack, and …

And the way Silvio was looking at me said I’d miscalculated about more than his honor.

He leaned in, voice low like we were sharing a secret. “We needed your fluffin. But we also needed you.”

I took a step back, the blood draining from my face. “What?”

He smiled, showing his fangs. “Oh, your little Stone Keeper didn’t tell you that?”

I stared at him stupidly. “You need dragon blood.”

“Do you see any dragons down here, Pendragon?”

I didn’t answer that. I hadn’t been sure what Mortis had been planning to do about that part. I figured we’d wipe them out before they got that far, or that Lord Sharma had lied to them about what was needed.

But we were the ones who had been lied to.

He shook his head. “We don’t need a dragon to open the vault, Pendragon. We need a *rider*.” He tilted his head. “Sharma said you wouldn’t have known that.”

The words hit me like a slap. Fucking Zaira.

“Drakharrow isn’t going to like that one bit, is he?” Silvio’s expression was playful. “Where is your little boyfriend, anyhow?” He leaned in and touched a strand of my hair, smoothing it off my face.

“Fuck off,” I snarled.

“Just being helpful, darling. After all, I’m your master now.” He gestured. “So, if you feel like getting down on your knees—”

“You can go fuck yourself if you think that’s happening.” My wrists itched where they’d bound my hands.

He kept smiling. “It’s amazing what an honorable man will do when he’s desperate enough. Sharma didn’t tell us at first, of course. It took a while.

But eventually, he rolled over like a good dog and spilled all his precious dwarven secrets."

A wave of sickness rolled through me as I thought of the pieces of Lord Sharma's body we'd found.

"Now, the bear, on the other hand," Silvio went on, "I think it'll take a little longer to break that beast. But we'll get there." He met my eyes. "It'll be fun, too. Maybe I'll even let you watch, my little fiery beauty. You'll be naked, of course."

"I'd think you'd be more concerned with getting to the fucking eggs, you idiot," I snarled.

He shrugged. "I can have a bit of fun along the way." He frowned and for a second, his mask slipped, and I saw anxiety beneath it.

"You've lost a lot of people, Silvio. And you know the vault doesn't just take any blood—it wants the blood giver to be willing. And believe me, I'm anything but." I lunged forward before I could stop myself, the cords cutting into my wrists as I threw my weight at him, aiming my shoulder right at his chest.

We collided. Silvio gave a grunt and fell backward. But then Gretchen was suddenly there. She yanked me back, wrenching my arms. Pain shot through my shoulders. Silvio stepped forward, his expression angry. He slammed a fist into my stomach, and I doubled over gasping.

"Stupid bitch." He snapped his fingers at Gretchen. "Put her with the bear. Let her see what's coming."

They dragged me across the camp and threw me into another tent, dumping me on the ground unceremoniously. I rolled and came up on my knees. The first thing I saw was brown fur, wet with blood and matted. "Hawl!"

The Ursidaur was slumped on one side of the tent. They were still wearing their armor, but it was in rough shape. One shoulder plate had been half torn loose and hung crookedly by one strap. Their chest piece and vambraces were dented and blood-spattered. There was a long slash across their muzzle, exposing raw flesh beneath. One of their eyes was swelling shut. My eyes blurred with tears of rage.

"Little cub." Hawl's voice was weaker than usual, but still deep enough to send vibrations through me.

"What have they done to you?"

"Nothing I did not return upon them tenfold," Hawl growled.

“Yes, I saw you left a little bit of chaos in your wake.” I hiccuped, then knelt down carefully and scooted closer to them. The scents of blood and iron filled the tent.

Hawl narrowed their good eye at me. “Why did you come, little cub? You should not be here. Did you not see the little pup?”

“What do you mean?”

“The fluffin. I saw him scampering as they took me.”

Neville had gotten away. I smiled. “I don’t think Silvio knows that yet.” Hawl gave a rumbling laugh. “But even if I had known,” I continued, “of course I would have come. The real question is why did you come alone?”

The bear’s brow seemed to furrow. “The little pup was in danger. I could not also risk my little cub.”

My heart clenched. “Oh, Hawl.”

“I have only ever wanted to protect you, little cub.” Their rumbling voice was softer than I’d ever heard it. “Across worlds I traveled. And now look at us.” They gave a rasping wet cough that filled me with worry.

“It’s my turn to protect you now. You’ve done plenty.”

Hawl’s expression seemed exasperated, yet I caught a tinge of pride. “We are in a sorry fix now.” They lifted their paws a little, and I saw their wrists were chained to a ring hammered into the ground.

I looked down at the ropes around my own wrists. Silvio had been too annoyed to think to chain me. “Blake and the others are probably already on their way.” I thought of Rodriguez and wondered how long it had taken him to raise the alarm. I hoped the knock on the head I’d given him wouldn’t leave any lasting effects—besides maybe greater surliness. “When the rest of Fluffin Squad arrives, Mortis is fucked.” I assessed Hawl. “You seem to have taken out a lot of Silvio’s people.”

“Not enough,” Hawl rumbled. They eyed me. “Now that you are here, they will likely kill me.”

I’d thought of that already, too. “We’re not as helpless as they might think.” I closed my eyes for a moment—taking stock of the sensation that had begun the moment I knew Orcades was gone. A strange feeling, like a rising current. A pulse in my blood. A hum under my skin. Whatever you wanted to call it, I felt something.

My mind went to Rodriguez and his stupid prophecy. I’d rolled my eyes when he’d claimed it was about me, but now I wondered. My blood was one of the things needed to reach the eggs—not dragon’s blood, mine.

“What are you thinking, little cub?” Hawl said.

“I’m thinking,” I said slowly, “that Rodriguez is going to be absolutely unbearable if we get out of this alive.”

The bear gave a great rumbling laugh that shook the tent. “Is that a pun?”

I smiled and lifted my wrists.

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CHAPTER 63

BLAKE



Blood sprayed hot across my face as the Mortis boy I'd been fighting stared down at his chest, then dropped. I yanked my sword free and stepped back, breathing hard. Around me the cavern rang with the sounds of shouting and clashing steel.

Mortis had chosen the location for their camp well—a defensible spot up on a high flat ledge surrounded by tall pillarlike crags. But in every other way they were fools. After all, they'd thought baiting Pendragon was a good idea. They were losing now—and quickly. Half the tents around me had collapsed, the bright red and white canvas slashed and trampled.

I scanned quickly, checking on the rest of my squad. Visha was moving in a blur of silver, her daggers slicing viciously as she cut through two Mortis students who had come at her from either side. Sankara was near her, fighting like a fucking siege engine. His battle-ax rose and fell in beautiful, brutal arcs, every swing forcing those around him to give up space and move back. I didn't see Kazmyn, but I had no doubt the rogue bastard was fine.

We'd left Rodriguez with Zaira at our new base camp; the scholar and the Stone Keeper weren't warriors. Besides, when we'd gotten past the third ward, Neville had come racing toward us, his little pink tongue lolling out happily. I took his arrival as a good sign. The fluffin wasn't stupid. If Pendragon and Hawl were dead, I didn't think he'd look so happy.

Still, intelligent creature or not, we'd decided Neville's time of running free was temporarily at an end. We'd tied him up back at camp for now. When we'd left, he'd been howling sadly at Rodriguez.

The third ward … I'd thought things were going to get easier, but it had been the most brutal of all, albeit the simplest. Zaira had looked ill when

she read the inscription aloud. We'd thought there had to be another way. But there wasn't.

A Mortis student suddenly came at me shrieking with what I think was supposed to be a battle cry. I met him head on. He had a spear—which was a bad choice in close quarters, especially as he didn't really know how to use it. I knocked it aside, then drove my shoulder into his chest hard enough to send him reeling. He was so young, maybe a Third Year. His eyes were wild, and he was drenched in sweat. I almost felt sorry for him, but then my heart hardened. He'd probably volunteered to come. And he'd had a chance to change his house—Pendragon had offered everyone that much.

He slashed a knife at my face, and I grabbed his wrist, twisting it until the bone snapped. He screamed. I shoved him backward, ripped the knife from his hand, and buried it in his throat. He dropped to his knees, choking out on his own blood. I saw the shock in his eyes, and I knew what he must be thinking. We were highbloods; we were supposed to be practically immortal. Yet here he was, dying in a dwarven cave. I kicked him onto his back and left him there.

"Blake!" Visha's voice.

I spun around. Silvio Santos had leaped up onto a rise of broken rock behind me. His fangs were bared in a cocky grin that made my pulse spike. Golden skin—that was soon going to be bleeding. Square jaw—that would be shattered once I got my hands on him. Hands—that were still intact, but not for long.

"Well, Drakharrow," he called to me. "You finally caught up."

I started toward him. Another Mortis student got in my way, and I cut them down without even seeing their face. Another came at me from the side. Sankara was suddenly there, his ax swinging, taking their head off before I even had to turn.

"Go." Sankara clapped me on the shoulder briefly. "We've got this."

I didn't waste my breath answering. Silvio jumped off his little rock. He stood in a ring of stone columns. He'd clearly picked the spot intentionally. "Where is she?"

He laughed as I approached. "The devoted highblood husband."

"We have the fluffin," I said conversationally.

Silvio's eyes widened. He hadn't known that—not until now. Then his eyes narrowed. "You've got the fluffin. But it was my name Medra was screaming as I fucked her."

My vision blurred with white-hot rage. “You’re going to regret ever saying her name.” Scales started spreading across my skin. I fought them back. If I shifted here, in this small space, I could wind up crushing friends and foes alike. I couldn’t risk it, no matter how much Santos deserved a taste of my dragon fire. Besides, I knew he had to be lying. Wasn’t he? Fear pricked at my heart. If he’d dared to hurt her like that …

“She wept for you,” Santos said, dancing backward. He feigned tears. “Poor girl. Shame you weren’t there.”

I froze for half a heartbeat. And then, I saw her. On the far side of the camp, where the cavern wall curved inward into a new tunnel, she was there with Hawl beside her. Red hair tangled and wild, face streaked with blood, but very much alive. Alive and angry and beautiful. Relief hit me so hard my knees nearly buckled. Then my eyes widened. My girl was fighting all right—and what I saw her fighting with made my mind spin. Her hands were raised and fire was erupting from them in a steady stream. I wasn’t sure what was going on exactly. Medra mentioned to me once that she lost all her powers when she crash-landed in Sangratha. At the time, I figured she meant that she had some kind of higher social status in her homeland, but seeing these literal flames coming from her as naturally as fire pours from my jaws in dragon form, I suddenly realized she wielded more magic as fae than I ever considered.

“That’s my girl,” I muttered under my breath. Then I turned to face Silvio with a laugh on my lips. “You fucking liar.” The bastard was slipping away between two pillars. I cut across his path. “Oh no. You don’t get to leave. Do you remember what I told you?” I asked, advancing slowly, my voice dangerously soft.

He swallowed. “You talk too much, Drakharrow. Are we doing this or not?”

Wrong thing to say. I hit him hard enough to send his sword arm flying wide, then drove my elbow into his mouth. I heard teeth crack. He staggered, blood spilling down his pretty chin. I kicked his knee, and he staggered, snarling and slashing wildly for my thigh. I let him cut me, then I caught his wrist. He screamed as the bones gave way with a wet crunch. I pushed him back, and he slid across the loose stones. I was on him before he could get up again, planting my boot on his ruined arm as he shrieked.

I leaned down. “I was serious about the hand, Silvio.” I severed it at the wrist as he tried to claw at my leg with his free hand.

“Fuck you,” he spat through his blood-filled mouth.

I laughed. “That’s more like it.” Then I drove my sword through him, and I watched the arrogance drain from his filthy, bullying face. I wrenched my blade free, already turning to where I’d seen Pendragon. She was still there, fighting on the far side of the camp.

There was a body laying on the ground near her, a petite high-blood girl. For a moment I thought it was Visha, and my heart went to my throat. Then I saw long silver hair—Larissa. Gretchen was still on her feet, the tall highblood’s fading scar flashing as she moved just out of the reach of Pendragon’s fire.

Fire. I could hardly believe it. Pendragon had fucking fire coming from her fingertips. I grinned so hard it hurt. Always knew my girl brought the fire.

At her back stood Hawl. I watched as the Bearkin swept out his paw and took out two highbloods trying to flank Pendragon. I started toward them, still with a smile on my face. Mortis was falling. It was almost too easy.

Then I froze, spotting movement to their right. Alastor Vane had slunk out of his hiding spot. One of his arms was still bandaged and in a sling, thanks to Visha’s arrow. He stood in the shadow of a high tent with a knife in one hand. He raised it to his other hand and sliced it, wrist to palm. As the blood streamed down his fingers, he chanted something.

My heart jumped into my throat. Blood magic.

“Pendragon!” I roared, moving forward.

But Vane was already pulling his arm free of the sling and raising his hand. Pendragon didn’t hear me. She was too focused on Gretchen.

But Hawl heard.

As Vane flung his blood forward in a spatter, the Bearkin turned and stepped directly into its path. The blood-magic spell struck the bear full in the chest. Hawl’s massive body jerked as if invisible blades had cut through it, running from shoulder to hip and from throat to stomach. The warrior bear made a sound, more shock than pain, then collapsed, their huge body hitting the ground with a boom that seemed to shake the camp.

Vane was still smiling his greasy smile as Sankara came up behind him with a roar and a sweep of his ax. The blood-magic professor’s head left his shoulders, the smile frozen in place.

Medra had finished off Gretchen. The girl’s body lay in a seared, smoking heap.

I’d moved with highblood speed, darting across the camp. I was there as she turned, close enough to see the skin beneath the freckles on her face go pale as she saw the Bearkin. Close enough to see her break. Close enough to catch her as she started to fall.

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CHAPTER 64

FLORENCE



Is this really happening?” Regan murmured from beside me.

Behind us the manor was falling apart—timbers cracking, stones groaning. A fire had started on one of the upper floors. Now flames were running along shattered beams and smoke came bursting out of broken windows.

Good. Let the house of horrors burn to the ground. The servants had plenty of time to get out, and we’d already cleared the dungeon. Even with the burning building behind us, my eyes were fixed on the sky. Above us, Nyxaris and Viktor tore through the air like two nightmares turned flesh. Nyxaris’s Duskdrake was all dark shadow and fury. His vast obsidian wings beat like thunder, black scales flashing wherever the light hit him. He wasn’t fighting from a place of fury, though. His movements weren’t wild or erratic—like Viktor’s. No, Nyxaris knew exactly what he was doing. He was hunting with the confidence of a predator who had no doubt his prey would soon fall. In the air with him, Viktor’s Inferni was a red ruin. Regan had told me that the last time she’d seen Viktor in dragon form one of his wings had been crushed and ragged.

Unfortunately, the ancient highblood seemed to have recovered somewhat. He could fly: Both wings were out. But the corruption that had been apparent on his highblood body was even more prominent on his dragon. Black veins spread beneath scarlet scales. Whatever the corruption was that he’d allowed to taint him, it didn’t seem to be giving him greater powers or increased strength. If anything, it looked like he was as diseased as those infected by the plague—except Viktor Drakharrow just wouldn’t die. Still, one of his wings was half-shredded. Nyxaris must have done that with his claws before we’d come above ground. Viktor flew unevenly but

steadily. Fire poured from his jaws in terrible bursts that turned the air white-hot. As he roared fire, embers rained down to the ground with every beat of his wings.

Beside me, Regan's hand had found mine. We stood on a patch of dry, dead grass, fingers locked together as we watched the battle. While my eyes were focused mostly on the sky, Regan's were on the ground.

Viktor wasn't alone. He'd had battalions of guards at the ready, stationed inside and around the manor. Molindra had taken most of them out, but a few still remained. Dressed in red and black, some held swords and others crossbows, while on a stone terrace just outside the manor, some men were scrambling to set up a ballista.

I clutched Regan's hand. "Look," I whispered. "They'll shoot Nyxaris."

She squeezed my hand back. "Not going to happen." She pointed at where Kage and Lysander were moving together like a tornado. Kage had shifted into his wolf form, leaving his clothes at our feet when he transformed. The huge Avari wolf stood as high as a horse and was all silver-gray muscle and speed. Lysander ran beside him, silver hair tied back, two blades flashing in his hands. Together they reached the guards at the ballista and cut them down quickly and ruthlessly. They couldn't help Nyxaris above, but they could clear the field and protect the sky. Every guard they slayed meant one less bolt aimed at my dragon as he fought the red monster above us.

Across the grounds, a single guard raised his crossbow and shot a red-tipped quarrel upward. I held my breath, watching it streak. It missed Nyxaris's wing by what looked like mere inches. I trembled. "I should be doing something. I should be helping. I should be up there on his back."

Regan released my hand, slipping her arm around my waist to steady me. "Breathe," she said, her voice gentle. "You're barely standing, Florence. This is where you need to be." Her blond hair flew around her face, tangled from the wind and filled with smoke. She looked back at the fight, where Kage was ripping out the throat of the guard who'd shot the bolt as Lysander drove a blade into another man's side.

"You could go with them," I said, my voice small.

"This is where I need to be," she said firmly. "With you."

"You could fight. I can stand on my own."

She shot me a smile. "I can't fight like them."

I understood. Compared to Nyxaris, Kage, and Lysander, we were not the tip of the spear.

"Not everyone has to be a warrior," Regan said quietly. "We've both fought our own battles." Her voice grew stronger as she watched our consorts fight. "They have this." Her expression was almost peaceful. She knew with that much certainty how this battle was going to end. I nodded.

Above us, Nyxaris and Viktor collided again, bodies meeting with a heavy rumble. Fire burst out across the low clouds. The Duskdrake rolled through Viktor's flames, but came out of them snarling and unbroken.

Regan felt me tremble. She tightened her arm and leaned toward me. "They're beautiful, aren't they? Our mates."

I looked at Nyxaris, blazing across the sky like a midnight banner. At Lysander and Kage, one pure steel and the other pure fang, moving together side by side as they wiped out guard after guard on the open ground so Nyxaris could finish what he'd come to do.

My eyes watered. "Yes. They are." I tried to get my body to accept the truth. Viktor's end was coming.

A roar suddenly split the sky. Above, Nyxaris had slammed into Viktor. The dragons wheeled together in midair, clawing and tearing at one another through cloud and smoke. Viktor's head turned toward one of Nyxaris's wings. His maw opened wide, and I saw the flames mounting.

"Nyxaris!" I gasped.

But my dragon was feinting. He lured Viktor closer with the promise of that wing and then he dove in, his jaws closing around Viktor's Inferni throat. Viktor let out a wild sound, not a roar but something shocked and furious. I saw dark blood spray from the wound on his throat. Nyxaris's teeth were still in. He held on tight, like a dog with a bone, shaking his head back and forth and widening the wound. And then the dragons were twisting together in midair. I watched Nyxaris's black wings beat as he wrenched Viktor off-balance. Together they began to fall in a violent spiral —Viktor thrashing as Nyxaris held on with savage tenacity. They hit the ground, shaking the earth under our feet and churning the dirt. Nyxaris's teeth were still in Viktor's throat. Slowly he released the Inferni and took a step back. The red dragon convulsed on his back, red scales and black veins spasming. Soon Viktor Drakharrow lay on the ground in a man's body, naked and bleeding.

For the first time since I had known him, he looked truly weak. Black veins webbed over his chest, pulsing with rot. His white hair was no longer slicked back. Instead it hung in stringy clumps around a face that was suddenly showing every single mark of time. His body looked frail, all jutting bones and paper-thin flesh. Viktor Drakharrow was no longer regal or terrifying or immortal. He was a pathetic ruin of a man. But his eyes … Those red eyes turned toward Regan and me, and I saw they were the same: red and full of pure hatred. I knew he would never, ever stop.

Regan's hand squeezed my waist. I looked up at her. Her mouth had gone hard, but I could see the emotion underneath. I knew what she was feeling because I felt the same things—the anger, the grief, the shame. And always the fear. I felt a sick, disorienting pull at seeing our abuser finally laid bare. The urge to both kill him and run from him.

Regan's breathing had grown uneven. Near Viktor, Nyxaris stood, still in Duskdrake form. I knew he would not shift back until Viktor was dead. Kage loped slowly toward us with Lysander beside him. As they reached us, Kage shifted. He grabbed his clothes and began tugging them on.

"One of you must end this," Lysander said quietly, with all the solemnity and dignity of an ancient knight. "In the end, this battle was always yours, for it is you who this man has wronged the most."

Regan and I looked at one another. Her face was pale and beautiful and angry all at once. I glanced where Viktor lay, searching myself for the rage that had consumed me for so long. It was still there, but it had shrunk. I knew it would continue to dwindle. The desire for vengeance was still inside me—but it was no longer the most important thing. I looked at Nyxaris. Soon, we could both breathe. Soon, this would end. But the fight wasn't finished. Viktor wasn't the last threat to our peace. I knew that now.

"I want you to do it," I said to Regan. "For both of us. Please."

Her brows knitted together. "Are you sure? He took from you just as much as me."

I thought of what she had gone through, what she must have endured as Viktor's consort—and even after all I'd been through, I wondered if that was true. I slipped both my hands into hers and squeezed gently. "I just want it to be over. I want him gone. I want us to be free."

She stared at me for a long moment, then she nodded and began to walk across the field.

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CHAPTER 65

BLAKE



It turned out victory felt a lot like mourning. If anyone had asked me a few days earlier how I'd feel after eliminating the Mortis squad, I'd have said *satisfied*. I'd probably have pictured myself holding Silvio's fucking hand up like a trophy. Pendragon would have been safe in my arms, and I'd have felt like a fucking hero for once.

That was the fantasy. The reality was Silvio was dead, Mortis was gone, and after losing Hawl, I didn't feel like much of a hero.

Our trek going forward had been much quieter. No one was in the mood for talking. Not even Kazmyn. Pendragon was going through all the right motions. She ate and slept and walked beside me. But I'd seen her face and felt her body wracked with sobs when we were in our tent. She let me hold her, but she wouldn't talk to me. Not yet. During the day, she was mostly silent. I understood. Hawl had been more than a friend, more than a protector. The bear had known her all her life. They'd been the thread she never thought she'd find—connecting her old life to this one. Now that was gone and she was bereft. When I touched her, she wouldn't pull away. But she didn't reach for me either.

Then there was Magda. I'd had to tell Pendragon about her loss, too. Had to explain how Professor Stonefist had sacrificed herself at the third ward before any of us could stop her. Like she'd known from the start this was where she'd been walking all along. Knowing Zaira and her fucking secrets, for all we knew maybe Magda had figured it out. Professor Stonefist wouldn't want us to focus on her death, she'd want us to finish the quest. But we were all so numb from the amount of sacrifices needed to complete this journey, I began to wonder what we were fighting to save anymore.

Imagining an end to this whole ordeal seemed impossible if the world we'd be building on the other side lacked so many of our loved ones.

Everyone walked slowly, carrying their grief with them. The only one who seemed remotely eager was Zaira.

We'd been walking through a narrow tunnel. Now it opened up into a huge, high cavern. Ahead of us lay something new. A sweeping stone staircase.

"This is it," Zaira announced breathlessly. Her face was practically radiant with excitement. "The inner vault lies at the top of those stairs."

"Looks more like a mountain to me," Visha observed. She gave a tired sigh and glanced at me. I smiled sympathetically.

We'd been marching all day, and I knew everyone had hoped Zaira was about to tell us we could make camp, instead of forcing us up what looked like an infinitely high stone staircase. I studied the stairs; they really did look like a mountain from here. And worse, nothing lay on either side except a deep, dark chasm. The steps were wide enough for a caravan to safely go up them, but there were no railings.

"We'll go slowly and carefully," Zaira assured us. "But we must not stop now. Not when we're so close."

"You mean because there might be someone waiting up there on the other side?" I asked bluntly.

She scowled. "That is not possible."

No matter how we pressed her, Zaira always claimed the same thing with the same level of confidence—that no one could possibly make it through the northern passage. That the fail-safe was no danger. Then she'd grumble about how she wished she'd never told us about it in the first place. Kazmyn would look apologetic, and that would be that.

I watched Zaira as she climbed the stone stairs. She moved with a purpose that should have felt reassuring but didn't. Her dark braids swung between her shoulder blades, threaded with ribbons of gold. She hadn't cried for Lord Sharma. Or Magda. Or Hawl. But everyone grieved differently, I reminded myself.

"We're nearly at the top," she announced excitedly, turning to look back at us. "Look." She pointed. Above us, the staircase ended at a platform. Something lay in the center—a low, rectangular object of stone on a carved base. Runes spiraled around the edges of the slab. It looked like a dwarven bed made for royalty.

Beyond it stood high gates. My heart sped up. *The vault.*

The gates were massive and wrought in gold. Their surface depicted four dragons. It was hard to tell when they were all made of gold, but I was pretty sure they were supposed to represent each of the dragon lineages. I frowned as we moved higher up the steps, noticing that the gates weren't just made of gold, they were covered with something else. A thick layer of ice enveloped the gates in some parts, with a filigree of frost coating others.

"Bloodmaiden," Rodriguez breathed.

Zaira turned to look down at us all. "We have reached the final threshold," she declared. "We are very close now."

Pendragon stood beside me. Her face was numb as she stared at the gates. "What now?"

Sankara had passed Zaira. He approached the gates, looking at them with a curious expression. He reached out a hand—

"Do not touch them!" Zaira cried sharply. "To touch them while locked is death." Sankara's hand dropped. "All of you must wait below the first step," she decreed imperiously. "Those gates were forged by Silvraynes, frost wards were laid into the metal. Should you touch them, the ice will take you to the bone. You will die before you can scream."

Kazmyn whistled. "Cheerful, Sister."

She ignored him and looked at Pendragon. "You and the fluffin will come forward. The rest of you must wait on the stairs."

I opened my mouth to protest, but Pendragon didn't even look at me. She moved up one step, then another. The fluffin gave a little yap. He hesitated, bouncing back and forth on the step just in front of me. I reached down to scratch between his ears. "I guess this is it, Nev. Go do your thing."

He looked at me, then growled softly in a way I thought was playful. Then he hopped up the final steps and followed Zaira and Pendragon.

"Lie down on the slab while I activate the runes," Zaira said to Pendragon.

"I don't like this," Rodriguez murmured beside me. His face was uneasy.

I shook my head. "Neither do I. But we're right here." My hand was already on the hilt of my sword. I glanced at Kazmyn. To my surprise, the boy looked as troubled as Rodriguez.

Zaira was doing something. She'd moved over to a table-like stone panel set into the floor beside the slab that I hadn't noticed at first. Runes were set into it. She looked back at us. "My blood is needed first," she explained,

like she was instructing a class. “Watch and see.” She pulled out her knife and made a shallow cut in her arm, then smeared the blood onto her other hand and touched it to two of the runes. Immediately the runes flared to life and a wall of pale blue light shot up in a circle, surrounding the gate, the slab, the panel—and Zaira, Neville, and Pendragon.

“What the fuck is going on?” I demanded, immediately moving up to the highest step.

The blue wall of light curved upward in a complete sphere, covering the stone landing totally.

“The barrier is for your safety,” Zaira declared. “It will lower when the vault opens.” Her voice was calm—but that was when I knew for certain that she was lying. Something was off.

I whirled toward Kazmyn. “Did you know? Did you know about this?”

His head jerked. “No, I swear to you. I knew about none of this.”

“Blake.” Visha grabbed my shoulder. “Look.”

Pendragon wasn’t an idiot—so of course she was trying to get up off the slab. She was saying something to Zaira, her green eyes flashing with anger. Zaira ignored her, touching another rune. She couldn’t get off the slab, I realized, because metal clasps had slid out from the sides, snapping shut over her wrists and ankles.

“Pendragon!” I hit the barrier with both hands—it jerked with force. Agony exploded through my palms and up my arms, and my body jolted backward, nearly flying over the side of the steps. The only reason it didn’t was thanks to Sankara. He grabbed me in midair, yanking me down. We both hit the steps hard. I was on my feet in an instant, ignoring the pain. Inside the barrier, Pendragon’s body had gone limp and her eyes had closed.

“What the fuck is this, Zaira?” Visha shouted.

The Stone Keeper finally turned. “It must be done. Do not touch the barrier again.”

“Open it!” I roared. “Or I swear I will tear you apart.”

“Do you not understand? If you touch it, you will only kill her faster.” She turned her back.

I looked at Pendragon in horror. Her lips were blue. Frost crept across the slab, white crystals spreading over her sleeves, tracing the outline of her jaw. I saw her breath lift in a pale cloud into the air.

Beyond the slab, the gates had begun to change. The thick ice coating the bars was slowly melting. Drops of water dripped down the carved dragons

and onto the stone floor.

Rodriguez stood beside me. “She’s bringing down the ward using Medra’s life-force.”

A whining sound came from in front of us. Neville sat at the base of the barrier looking worried. He lifted his paws, placing them against the barrier and started scrabbling helplessly against it, as if trying to dig his way out to us.

“It’s all right, Nev,” I whispered, terrified he was going to get hurt. But the barrier didn’t seem to harm him from the inside.

And then—the blue light crackled. I froze. So did Rodriguez.

The fluffin let out a sharp, happier yelp—which Zaira continued to ignore—and scratched harder, his ears flattened back, tail puffed out. Neville was going for it, trying to disrupt the force field. We were doing this.

“Shit,” I whispered, as a tiny seam began to appear—hardly thicker than a finger.

“Bloodmaiden, he’s really doing something,” Rodriguez whispered with excitement. “Don’t stop, little fellow.”

I dropped to my knees beside the barrier. “Neville! Good boy. Keep going. Keep fucking going.”

The fluffin scratched faster, his little body practically vibrating with effort, and the seam widened a fraction more.

I watched Zaira. She still had her back to us, bent over the rune-stones. The frost on the gates was continuing to melt. Pendragon’s hands were blue now. Her breath seemed thinner.

Impatient, I shoved my fingers toward the crack.

Kazmyn grabbed my wrist. “Wait.”

I rounded on him with a snarl on my lips. He was holding out a dwarven knife.

“We need to be careful,” he whispered. “Here. Take this.”

Right. Smart bastard. He had another blade already out. Together, we both jammed the knives into the crack as Neville backed away, prancing, tongue lolling as if he were as excited as we were. The blue light sizzled and sputtered as we tugged. But the shield was strong; it was like trying to pry rocks apart with kitchen knives.

Sankara took Kazmyn’s knife from him. “Pull,” he instructed.

I planted my boots on the stone and threw all of my strength into it. Slowly, the seam of light stretched like torn cloth. Around the crack, the

barrier rippled. But Zaira still hadn't noticed.

"I can fit," Kazmyn said. He was already crouched down by the opening.

"Careful," Rodriguez cautioned. "If it snaps shut …"

"No." Visha had caught Kazmyn by the shoulder and pulled him back. "I'm smaller. I'm doing it." She glanced at me, and I understood. Before Kazmyn could argue again, she'd dropped low and turned sideways.

Sankara and I hauled, pulling the barrier to the sides as best we could. Visha began to slide through. For one awful second, her hip brushed the edge of the blue light. Instantly, cloth dissolved with a hiss and the flesh beneath bloomed in a raw, angry burn. My stomach lurched as the smell of burned flesh hit me. Visha's face went white, but she didn't scream or slow down. She finished sliding through, then stood up, dagger in her hand. She looked back at us just once, her eyes going to Kazmyn with something like sympathy. I glanced at Zaira's half brother. "You might want to look away."

His face was tight, but his gaze didn't waver. "No."

"Zaira!"

The Stone Keeper was still facing the rune panel, but at the sound of Visha's voice, she finally spun. For a moment, she looked confused, then furious. "What have you done?"

"Zaira, stop this now!" Kazmyn shouted.

"You fools!" Zaira exclaimed. "Don't you understand? This is the only way. We must protect the eggs."

Pendragon lay white and still on the stone slap. Frost crawled across her freckled throat.

"Will it kill her?" I demanded, raising my voice in a roar.

Zaira looked down at me, her eyes righteous with certainty. "That is the price."

"Then, the price is too high," I said. I looked at Visha. No words were needed.

"You would doom the world for the sake of one girl?" Zaira screamed.

But it was too late. Visha's dagger sank below the Stone Keeper's ribs. Blood sprayed across the rune panel. The barrier fell.

I scrambled up onto the stone landing in a heartbeat. "Pendragon!" I dropped to my knees beside the slab.

Kazmyn had run up, too. He didn't move to where Zaira lay, fallen. Instead he was at the rune panel. He coated his fingers in his sister's blood

and touched one rune, then another, his face anxious. The clasps around Pendragon's wrists and ankles parted, but she didn't move.

"Pendragon," I whispered, gently picking her up off the slab. I slid her down onto my lap carefully, cradling her head. She was cold, so cold, and her body was limp.

I choked on a sob. *Fuck.* Pendragon wasn't moving. She was dead.

This wasn't supposed to be how it went down. This wasn't how it was supposed to end. Not for her. She was never supposed to be the price we paid.

Rodriguez was suddenly at my shoulder. He grabbed Pendragon's wrist before I could stop him, holding his fingers to her pulse point. "She has a pulse," he murmured. "Barely."

I turned on him, half-feral. "My blood. I should give her blood."

"Wait," he said sharply. He looked at her wrist, then at her ankles, where the clamps had held her. "I have an idea." He rifled through his satchel. I heard the clink of glass. He pulled out two small bottles and uncorked them with his teeth, dumping the contents into his hands, and started rubbing them together forming a mixture. I eyed his hands, smelling something citrusy. The concoction was a very dark blue.

"Shadowroot and mirthleaf," he explained. He reached for Pendragon's wrist and began slathering the mixture over the marks the clamps had left. "Shadowroot for the frostbite. Mirthleaf to interrupt the rune's poison. If I'm right, the clamps were contact points. But they've left wounds on her that are still drawing, even now that the restraints have been released. This should disrupt that."

"Should?" I echoed.

"Shut up and let me try," he snapped, reaching for Pendragon's other wrist. He moved to her ankle, then the other. A crack sounded. We turned to see white ice creeping back across the gates.

"You fools," Zaira gasped. I'd almost forgotten she was there. The Stone Keeper was slumped against a stone column. Blood had soaked across the front of her robes, but her eyes still burned. Kazmyn crouched beside her, his face very still.

"Her death … is the only thing … that can open gates. You've doomed us all."

"We'll take our chances," Rodriguez said coldly, watching Pendragon's chest.

“Come on, little dragon,” I whispered. “You can do this.” Moments passed painfully. I’d never been good at waiting.

Then Pendragon’s breath hitched.

Her chest lifted and fell. Her color wasn’t returning, but at least now I could see her breath.

“Now,” Rodriguez instructed. “Give her your blood. It should help to revitalize her.”

I tore my wrist open and pressed it gently against her lips. “Come on, Pendragon. Drink up for me.” I dribbled the blood into her mouth. At first, nothing.

Then finally I saw her throat move. She swallowed weakly.

I was practically sobbing with relief. I smoothed her hair back with my free hand. “There you go. That’s it. I’ve got you. You’re all right, little dragon.”

Her lashes fluttered. Rodriguez checked her pulse again. “Good. Her body’s gaining strength.”

Rage soared through me as I thought of what Zaira had almost done. I turned to look back at the Stone Keeper, to chastise her, to threaten her. But it was too late. Kazmyn was laying Zaira down on the stone gently. He’d already closed her eyes. She was gone.

Visha stood near him silently, her jaw tight. No one spoke.

Pendragon was breathing easier.

“I think that’s enough,” Rodriguez advised. “We don’t want her to choke.”

I drew my wrist back and slowly got to my feet with Pendragon in my arms.

“I have an idea,” Rodriguez said abruptly. I looked at him. His hair was wild, and he smelled of herbs. “Do you trust me?” he demanded.

I stared at him. He’d tricked me once. I’d nearly lost anything that mattered. But now, my girl was alive in my arms because of him. I sighed. “It might make me a fool, but yes, I think I do.”

His mouth twitched. “Good. Maybe we’re both fools. But I swear to you, I don’t want to hurt you or her.” He inclined his head. “Pass her to Sankara.”

“Fuck no,” I snapped, my body going rigid.

“You think she’s ready to fly in this state?” Rodriguez asked.

That got my attention. “What?”

“I need you to turn into your dragon. And I don’t think you want to be holding her when that happens.”

Sankara stepped up. “I’ll protect her with my life.”

I believed him. But did it matter? “She just nearly died,” I whispered.

“Listen to me carefully, Blake,” Rodriguez said. “I think Zaira was wrong.”

I blinked. “She just nearly killed Pendragon because of how right she believed she was.”

“I know. But I think she only knew some of the truth, not all of it. The dwarves built this with the dragons. Dragons are not stupid. They would never build a vault that could not be opened if a rider was not available. They also would never want to kill a rider. It makes no sense.”

I stared at him. “You think the dwarves … added something?”

“I have no idea,” he said truthfully. “I think we’d need to ask more dwarves. But look at the gates. Silvrayne frost wards. We have something that should easily counter those wards, which any dragon would have had at their disposal.”

I looked around the wide open cavern. “Dragon fire.”

Rodriguez nodded.

I looked down at Pendragon. Her eyes were half-open. She was shivering weakly. “Go and be useful, Drakharrow,” she whispered. A sound like a laugh came out of me.

Sankara stepped forward again, and this time I let him take my girl, carefully lowering her into his broad arms.

“All right, everyone,” Rodriguez announced. “We need to get back down these stairs. Quickly, now.”

Visha scooped up Neville, and I saw her bury her face in his fur for a moment, her eyes closed. When she opened them, I touched her shoulder. “You did what you had to do.” She nodded. “I’ll see you in a moment,” I promised. “When this is through.”

Visha walked past me, and I stood alone on the platform before the frozen gates. I rolled my shoulders, looking at the curving dragons carved in the gold. “All right,” I muttered. “I’m one of you. You’d better recognize that and open up.”

And then I let go, the shift ripping through me fast. My claws bit into the stone. My tail lashed out. I felt the fire in my chest; it would rise when I

called it. I thought of the last time I'd summoned my flames. Every time before this, someone had gotten hurt.

That wouldn't happen this time. I was ready. I lowered my head toward the gate and let the flames pour forth.

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CHAPTER 66

REGAN



The rest of the world felt far away. There was only Viktor and me.

My former archon lay on his back in the mud. For the first time, he looked small to me. He was panting, his chest heaving. Blood poured from the wound across his ribs that Nyxaris had given him. Yet still he lived. Never harmless.

I looked down at him. His red eyes lifted to mine, still filled with the same old hate. How could my father ever have agreed to give me to such a man?

I smiled slightly. “Did you ever think this day would come?”

His mouth curled. Blood stained his fangs. “I see a little girl playing a dangerous game that is going to get her killed.”

The words were meant to make me feel small and weak. And in the past, that had always worked. Now I looked at him. “I’m not the one lying on my back in the mud.” Beside me, Kage growled, while Lysander silently held out a blade. I took it, the hilt still warm from his hand.

Viktor’s eyes tracked the movement, and for the first time I saw true unease pass over his face. Then he looked at us—first me, then Kage and Lysander, and gave an ugly smile. “So this is how low you’ve fallen. The little whore rutting with unnatural filth.”

Beside me, my consorts held very, very still. I lifted the blade. “Do you know what I think, old man? You don’t deserve any more of my words or another breath of fresh air. But there is one thing I wish you to know before you die.” I paused. I knew he was expecting a tirade of contempt. “The world will change for the better as soon as you’re gone from it.”

I didn’t drag things out. I didn’t torture him or put on a show. Because this wasn’t about him—not anymore. It was about me and Florence and

every person he'd touched and twisted.

One clean stroke was all it took. Then that was it.

Viktor Drakharrow died in the mud.

He would not be honored in death. He would not be missed. His grave, if we gave him the decency of one, would be unmarked. May his name be forgotten.

I turned away, a heavy exhaustion settling upon me. Lysander had already taken the blade. He wiped it clean on a patch of grass, then sheathed it.

A little ways off, Nyxaris stood in highblood form. He was dressed again. I studied him for a moment: a tall, imposing high-blood man who reeked of menace. Like Viktor, his hair was a silver-white—marking him as something ancient. Yet when he held Florence, gathering her up in his arms like a delicate, precious jewel, I knew there was nothing the same about them. Viktor simply wanted possession, while Nyxaris knew how to love.

I watched the way Florence looked up at him, weary and weak but so obviously bolstered by his mere presence. The way his head bent down toward hers, reassuring and shielding her. They made a stunning pair. So terribly, wonderfully in love.

I turned and looked at my own consorts. Kage's shirt hung open. His chest was marked with dirt and scratches. He looked like a god of war dragged back down into a mortal form. Beside him, Lysander's blue eyes studied me with careful intensity. For a moment, none of us moved. Then Kage stepped toward me, cupping my face with strong, warm fingers, as if assuring himself I was safe. Lysander's hand found the back of my neck, touching me tenderly. I pulled them around me, embracing them both, leaning into their strength and warmth.

"Regan," Nyxaris said, his voice cool. He and Florence came over to us.

Now that they were closer, I could see Nyxaris's long silver hair was darkened with blood in places. His jaw was tight, and his face was hard. It was clear the two of them had been speaking about something dangerous.

"Shall we assess?" Nyxaris said, his voice clipped. He reminded me of one of our professors. "Viktor Drakharrow is dead. Elowyn Wispwood is dead. Most of the guards are dead. Some have fled, and I don't expect them to return."

I shuddered. "Let's leave this place as soon as we can." I looked at Lysander. "The archway?"

“We’re not quite finished, I’m afraid,” Nyxaris said. “I saw Catherine Mortis briefly. She fled toward the Bonewood on horseback.”

“Surely the Veil is no longer in any danger,” Kage said slowly.

“No, but we should eliminate all threats,” Nyxaris said.

Kage nodded. “Catherine is alone?”

Nyxaris hesitated. “I’ll let Florence speak more to that.” He looked down at her.

The dark-haired girl took a small step, face frightened but determined. “When I was bound to Viktor …” She swallowed hard, then tried again. “When I was bound to Viktor, I was able to keep one thing from him. I’ll never know how, exactly.” She looked up at the tall man beside her. “He never knew Nyxaris could shift into highblood form.”

“That secret probably saved your life,” Kage said quietly.

Florence nodded. “But there’s more to it than that. The information didn’t only flow one way.” She touched a hand to her chest, then briefly closed her eyes, as if the rotten memory of Viktor still lingered somewhere. “He tried to shut me out and most of the time he succeeded. But when he felt some strong emotion—mostly anger, but sometimes triumph—things slipped through.”

Kage looked interested. “What sorts of things?”

“I didn’t see much,” she said. “But I saw enough. I know Marcus Drakharrow left to go belowground into the dwarven realm. Viktor sent him to retrieve dragon eggs from some kind of a crypt. Marcus has a plan—once he gets what he came for, he’ll trigger something that will destroy the vault and everything on the other side.”

I gasped. “Blake and Medra are down there.” The relief I’d started to feel was curdling. Kage swore under his breath.

When Nyxaris spoke, his voice was like iron. “Florence and I will head down to the vault. There’s a route near here that Marcus used. We’ll follow his trail as quickly as we can.”

Florence looked at us, her eyes moving from me to Lysander then to Kage. “I need to ask something of you. Of your triad.”

The word landed hard. *Triad.* I glanced at Kage in time to see his brief smile, then his look of pride. I looked at Lysander on my other side. He touched a hand to my waist. Wasn’t it silly that in the midst of all this grief and heartbreak I could still feel such joy? Or maybe it wasn’t silly at all.

Kage answered for us all. “We’ll handle Catherine Mortis. Don’t worry about her.”

“I’m sure Catherine still has lofty ambitions,” Nyxaris said grimly. “Put a stop to them as quickly as you can.”

Kage nodded. I suddenly thought of something. My eyes darted back to Florence’s. “Listen, there’s something else you should know.” Quickly I told her about the prophecy and how I believed Rodriguez must have told Medra it was about her. “If Medra thinks she has to sacrifice herself for the greater good …”

Florence nodded. “I understand. I’ll do everything I can to protect her.”

“I know you will,” I said softly. Our eyes met. “Maybe when all of this is over and we’re back at Bloodwing—”

Florence smiled. “You, Medra, and I will have to talk.” She reached for my hand and squeezed it one last time. “But I know one thing. Our friendship is only just beginning.”

My throat felt tight. I couldn’t find words, so I simply nodded.

“We should go,” Nyxaris said.

We watched the two of them walk away. Kage reached for my hand. I looked over at Lysander. He’d been so quiet. His face was distant. I assumed he was thinking of his sister. Now I touched his arm lightly. He looked down at me, blinking. Then his face cleared.

“The stables are this way. Let’s see if there are any horses left,” he suggested.

We moved toward the outer building. We were together; that was all that mattered. My triad was powerful, and we were united. We were ready for whatever was waiting for us in the Bonewood.

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CHAPTER 67

BLAKE



The interior of the vault was round and hollow like an egg. We came through the southern gate. As we entered, we could see the northern gate in the distance. To my relief, it was closed and looked untouched.

Inside, the walls were made of a pale, glowing stone. The ceiling curved over our heads in a smooth dome. A ring of interconnected pillars formed a high wall in two semicircles within. At the highest point above our heads sat a warm ring of light—like a lamp left on in a nursery. Beneath the ring, in the center of the room, sat a large, high basin of polished black stone, raised on a broad pedestal.

Inside that bowl were the eggs.

They were larger than I'd expected. Prettier, too. I'd thought they'd be similar to a bird's eggs, but these were the largest eggs I'd ever seen, each one nearly Neville's size. Some had a pearl-like whitish surface—those must have been the Silvrayne eggs. Others were a warm, honeyed-gold, Molindra's.

Neville broke the sense of solemnity with an excited yap. "Wait, Nev," I started to say, as the fluffin launched himself forward. I stared in horror as he leaped up onto the edge of the nest.

"Neville, careful, you'll break them," I exclaimed. "Careful, you little—"

Too late. I groaned as he dove into the clutch. We all moved to look down into the nest. But the eggs seemed fine; Neville hadn't broken any. He didn't look like he was planning to leave the nest anytime soon either. He wriggled himself down between some of the eggs, turning in small circles until he'd found a comfy spot. Then he flopped down, wrapping his large floofy tail around three of the closest eggs while resting his head against

another, as if he'd been doing this kind of thing all his life. No one spoke as Neville began to purr.

"Remarkable," Rodriguez murmured from beside me.

I was just opening my mouth to say something smug about how of course Neville loved dragons when a familiar voice cut through the chamber.

"About fucking time, little brother."

I whirled, my blood going cold as Marcus stepped out from behind a semicircular ring of pillars. My heart sank lower. He was tossing an egg in one hand. It was blackened, as if it had been burned. The shell was cracked in several places. Instead of beautiful and gleaming like the eggs still in the nest, this one was dead and dull.

"Think I killed this one," Marcus remarked. "Whoops."

He tossed the egg carelessly toward the other side of the room, and it shattered.

Pain surged through my chest as I stared at the broken shell on the floor and the dark smear inside. They weren't just eggs—they were babies, Molindra and Alabryss's children. And in some sense, my kin.

Marcus must have seen it on my face because he laughed. "You never fail to amaze me with how pathetic you can be, little brother."

"Don't," I said shortly. "Don't call me that."

"What?"

"*Brother.* Not anymore. We are nothing to one another, you and I. Not after what you've done." I shook my head. "Mother gave her life for us. And look what you've done with yours. Squandered it away."

Neville howled sadly. He'd sprung to his feet inside the nest, his tiny body puffed up in outrage to nearly twice its normal size. He let out a furious stream of yaps, all of which seemed to be directed at Marcus. It would have been funny in any other situation.

"There's my missing helper," Marcus said, looking down at the fluffin with interest. He took a step forward and Visha moved, as if to block his way. He stopped, staring at the fluffin. "I was supposed to have one of these with me. A female. But when I went to fetch the little bitch, she was gone." He shrugged. "Viktor got impatient and sent me down alone. He figured I'd either find you down here or Mortis." He smiled pleasantly at us, as if we were all just there for tea.

"You do realize there are more of us than there are of you, right?" Visha snapped.

He ignored her, which told me he had a plan—or a weapon we didn't know about.

Marcus grinned at me. "Lucky me. You brought everything I needed. I'll take the eggs and that fluffin. Viktor is going to be elated."

"Elated?" I scoffed. "Our uncle?"

"Our uncle and I … and Catherine," he added as if an after-thought, "are going to rule not only Sangratha but every world. We'll rule without borders. Highbloods above all."

There was a soft hissing sound, and Marcus's whole body jerked. He looked down. A small crossbow bolt jutted out from his chest. Right in the vicinity of his heart.

He made a choking sound, then staggered forward, his hands out as if to brace himself on the nest. Visha stepped up and kicked him in the center of his chest. Marcus went sprawling backward. Behind him, a man had stepped out of the shadowed opposite side of the chamber, beyond the other half ring of pillars. He lowered the small crossbow he was holding.

"I hope no one wanted to hear the rest of that speech," Nyxaris said coolly.

He glanced at me with something like sympathy in his amber eyes. "I'll finish this off quickly." He grabbed Marcus's body and dragged him back behind the other side of the pillars, out of my line of sight.

I heard a crack, then a wet sound. Then nothing at all.

Nyxaris emerged again, this time followed by another, slighter figure: Florence Shen.

She held something close to her chest. I saw with interest that it was a small, cream-colored fluffin with soft, gold-tipped ears.

"Put me down," Pendragon breathed from where she still half sat, half lay in my arms. "Put me down, Blake."

She twisted so fast, I nearly lost my grip. "Careful, now," I reminded her.

But the second her boots hit the stone, she was scrambling forward. I winced, hoping she wouldn't fall. But she was all right. My girl was so strong. Florence moved at the same time. The two girls collided and clung to each other. As they embraced, the little fluffin Florence had been holding sprang down from her arms.

"Florence," Pendragon sobbed.

"Oh, Medra!"

“You’re alive. You’re here. I wanted to come to you—so badly. How did you …”

As they spoke, I stared fascinated as the little fluffin Florence had been holding jumped up onto the side of the nest—clearly with a plan similar to Neville’s. From inside the nest, Neville lifted his head and stared. For a moment, the two little creatures just looked at one another. Then the smaller one, the female, made an excited chittering sound. The next moment, the two were circling one another awkwardly, over and around the eggs.

“Well, will you look at that?” Rodriguez breathed.

The fluffins were sniffing one another with frank curiosity. Neville gave a delighted little yap and pressed his nose to the other fluffin’s.

A hand clapped me on the shoulder, and I turned to see Nyxaris standing beside me. “We’ve been calling her Nell.” I assumed he meant the other fluffin. “It’s good to see you again, Brother.”

The word hit me like a punch to the chest. I gave an unsteady laugh. “You, too,” I managed to say. My throat tightened. My eyes burned. Nyxaris’s mouth twitched slightly. Then he grabbed me and pulled me against him in a brief embrace.

When he let go, Rodriguez was ready with a finger raised. “Who the hell are you? How are you here? How did you get here so fast? Where’s the fail-safe?” He paused to draw a breath.

“So fast?” Nyxaris glanced at me.

“The dwarven woman who was our guide told us it was impossible for anyone to come from the northern route,” I explained. “She said it was impassable.”

“But she also said that if anyone did manage to get through, they’d have the advantage of a fail-safe that could be tripped from the other side,” Visha said sourly. “Not off-putting in the slightest.”

Nyxaris raised a dark silver brow. “I see. Well, I think your guide needs to do more research. The northern way was not only passable, but it was also absurdly easy. We managed to walk through in the span of a few hours. We arrived moments ago, just in time to see Marcus destroy that egg.” His jaw tightened, reminding me that the eggs must mean a great deal to him. “If he’d touched the clutch again before you’d gotten here, I was going to dispose of him.”

“How the hell did he think he’d outmatch us all?” Sankara demanded.

Nyxaris shrugged. “Probably by telling you lies. I assume he would have mentioned Florence, threatened to have her killed if you didn’t do as he said. Or maybe he was just that cocky.”

I sighed. Knowing my brother, the latter was indeed possible. Marcus was a good fighter. I wasn’t sure he’d have been able to take on myself, Visha, and Sankara. Plus a weakened Pendragon. I glance at Rodriguez. And a pretty much defenseless professor of alchemy—but not completely useless when it came down to it.

“Viktor is dead,” Florence announced. That got everyone’s attention fast.

“Are you sure he’s dead?” Visha demanded. “You actually saw his body?”

Trust Vaidya to be slightly skeptical. I grinned weakly at her.

“I watched Regan kill him,” Florence assured her. “He’s very much dead.”

“Holy shit,” Pendragon murmured. She hadn’t let go of Florence, I noticed. Nyxaris and I were probably in for a few weeks of sleeping alone. Maybe the girls would let us sleep on the floor. I could probably handle that.

“Well, it took Fluffin Squad what felt like an eternity to get here,” Rodriguez said with a sigh. “I’ll never look at a mushroom the same way again. Now, about that fail-safe?”

Nyxaris waved a hand. “A switch. Marcus turned it on as he entered. Florence and I turned it back off. You’re in no danger.” He arched his brow. “Fluffin Squad?”

Rodriguez colored. “Team name. For morale.”

“Of course,” Nyxaris murmured.

“Regan killed Viktor?” Visha was shaking her head. “Didn’t think she had it in her. We’ll have to throw her a party.”

“Kage and Lysander were with her. They’re a triad now, you know,” Florence said brightly.

Visha’s jaw dropped. “They’re a what now?”

“Yes,” Florence said eagerly. “And Regan found her brother. We sent Persis and the children back to Bloodwing together. Regan and her triad went to find Catherine, and—”

Nyxaris touched her shoulder gently, coming to stand on her free side. “My love, there is much to tell. But not all of it must be told this second.”

Florence blushed and nodded. She looked at us. “If you’ve really been down here that long, you probably wouldn’t mind seeing the sun again.”

“The sun.” Visha gave a dramatic moan. “Yes, please.”

“We’ll secure the clutch,” Nyxaris started to say. He glanced at the nest.

Neville and Nell had curled up inside. They were facing one another, both tails wrapped around the eggs and around one another.

“Could they be siblings?” Visha suggested.

“Or future mates,” Sankara rumbled dryly.

“It’s good there are two of them,” Nyxaris said quietly. “Fluffins were brutally hunted by highbloods.”

“Why?” Visha asked.

“Because they’re the only way to dissolve a soul-bond,” Pendragon answered. She looked around the room. “We knew there was a second fluffin. And that Nyxaris could find where Florence was being kept and use it to help her.”

Orcades had told her. We’d had information passed from Lunaya to Lysander as well. Nyxaris had known most of the details when he’d left Bloodwing. I assumed he’d improvised the rest. Apparently, things had gone as well as we’d been hoping they would.

“The fluffin bonded to me and my last rider was slaughtered the night she was to be soul-bound,” Nyxaris suddenly said. I saw the pain of the memory flit across his face. Then Florence was there, lacing her hand through his.

“Hopefully the little creatures can be nurtured and thrive again,” Sankara said softly. He glanced at the eggs. “Just like the dragons.”

“There will have to be a lot of changes for that to happen safely,” I said.

“May we please discuss this all outside?” Visha said plaintively. “Under the warmth of the sun?”

“It’s not very sunny near the Bonewood,” Florence admitted. “But we’ll leave there quickly.”

“Anything is better than being belowground for another …” Vish trailed off, and I realized she was looking at Kazmyn.

“Will you come with us?” I asked him quietly. “You’re still welcome.”

When it mattered, he’d been loyal. He’d done the best he could. He hadn’t faulted us for our choices either. Even when he’d lost family. Kazmyn shook his head. “No. I’ll go back the way we came. I’ll report to

the council and tell them all that's happened." He met my eyes. "Everything."

"Be careful on the way back," Visha said, coming to stand near us.

Kazmyn smiled ruefully. "I'll try." He looked at her. "Perhaps I might visit Bloodwing someday. And you."

I moved away from them then, so they could speak privately. I'd tease Visha later, once we'd all recovered.

"Marcus brought baskets," Nyxaris said, showing me a stack of wicker containers. "We'll wrap the eggs up carefully and carry them all out with us."

"They'll be all right like that?" I asked dubiously. "When Marcus touched the egg …"

"The fluffins have calmed the eggs," Nyxaris said with confidence. "They'll be safe to move as long as the fluffins remain with us to help."

Rodriguez and Sankara came up to help and together we started packing the baskets.

Four men and a bunch of dragon babies. I was grinning as I worked. Was this my maternal side? I wondered, as I imagined baby dragon hatchlings scampering around Drakharrow Tower.

For the first time in a long time, the future looked bright.

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CHAPTER 68

REGAN



We'd taken the fastest horses we could find in the stables and left the manor house to burn. Kage rode in front of me. Lysander rode behind. We went silently, all of us focused on reaching our destination. Our task seemed simple enough: find Catherine Mortis. Stop her. Keep her away from the Veil.

I supposed the next step would be letting the Veil heal. Since I still wasn't certain what the Veil really was, I'd decided we could leave that up to more scholarly minds like Rodriguez and the dwarves.

I should have known better.

The farther north we rode, the more frightening the land around us became. When I'd heard the Bonewood mentioned, I'd pictured a forest full of grim, dead trees, but it was eerier. It rose around us like a rotten, drowned temple. The dead trees with their pale white trunks looked less like wood and more like bones that had been stripped clean. Roots spilled up out of the earth in long ridges that nearly tripped our horses, crossing our path like bony fingers reaching out of graves. We had to move slowly, mindful of the roots and the feeble light, which grew feebler as we made our way deeper into the forest. Above us, dead white branches laced together, shutting out even more of the cloud-filtered light.

After a while, the trees began to thin, making way for an ashy gray ground littered with rust-covered stones. I shuddered as I saw them, knowing the place had probably been used for blood sacrifice.

In the distance as we rode, the Veil rose up over us, like a wall of thick, dark clouds at the edge of the world. The more we saw of it, the more unsettled I felt. The fog was dense in some places, but in others you could

catch sight of something flickering within, a glow like lightning crawling inside of a cloud, never quite breaking free.

The horses didn't like it. After they had shied one too many times, we finally dismounted and led them through.

We reached the forest edge on foot. Catherine was already there. Her poor horse lay on its side a short distance from the Veil, its blood spreading across the pale earth. The Mortis girl looked just as poised as she had back at Bloodwing. She'd always had a regal, confident look to her. She wore her hair in a crown braid. Some strands had come loose, giving her a slightly disheveled appearance. Like a queen whose crown had fallen off.

Her eyes found mine, and a chill spread through me. Catherine was not frightened. No, not even at the thought of three against one. She looked delighted. "You idiots. Have you come to see the show?"

I frowned. "What are you talking about? You've lost. Don't you understand that? Viktor is dead."

She tossed her head back and laughed. "I haven't lost anything. Did you really think killing Viktor would be the end? That if you put down one old man, the world would simply right itself?"

"Shut up," Kage growled. Lysander hung back, saying nothing.

I watched Catherine's face as she looked at the Veil with an expression of reverence. "I didn't come here to bring it down—we've already done that, don't you see? I came to make an offering and watch what we put in motion come to fruition." She looked over at me. "The Veil *will* fall today. We didn't need dragons for that. You're too late."

Kage swore under his breath. "She's lying."

I wanted him to be right. "Why did Viktor want the dragon eggs?" I demanded. "Why bother with them, if you didn't require them for this?"

"Viktor always wants more dragons, and he'd sought the eggs for a long time. Of course, he wanted Marcus to go after them once we knew where they'd been kept. But the dwarves lied to you all. They didn't care about the Veil falling. Why would it matter to them when they're safely tucked away belowground? No, they wanted the eggs. The eggs were always their fail-safe."

Shit. I didn't know what to believe anymore. I turned to Lysander. He'd gone still in the way he did when I knew he was seeing more than one thing at a time: the world in front of him—and the one from his dreams. His eyes

weren’t on me or on Catherine. They were fixed on the Veil. On the dark wall rolling and churning before us.

“Lysander,” I said softly, “we need your council.” His gaze finally shifted to mine. My stomach dropped. “You’ve seen this already.”

Kage looked back and forth between us. “What?”

Lysander nodded. “Yes.”

“I don’t understand,” I said slowly. “You knew and you wanted us to come? Why, if you knew we couldn’t stop it?”

He closed his eyes. “We were always meant to come.” His beautiful face was miserable, like a man trying his best not to come apart.

I looked at the Veil, at Catherine, at the blood on the ground. Then the pieces came together. “*As the Veil grows thin*,” I said aloud, “*she shall approach. The woman who has crossed over and stood against the darkness.*”

Kage grabbed my hand. “Regan. No.”

I looked between them. At Kage with his fierce, protective eyes. At Lysander, pale and cursed with foresight. He’d known he was coming to this place even as his sister crumbled to dust. And he hadn’t tried to run away. The truth hurt so badly. It felt like a blade between my ribs. The prophecy had never been about the girl I wanted it to be. It wasn’t about Lunaya. Or Medra either.

It was about me. About us.

“Prophecies are deceptive things,” Lysander said, watching my face. “People treat them as if they’re maps, but they aren’t. They can be traps. Or warnings. Sometimes everything at once.” He looked past me at the Veil writhing above the trees. “There was no way to know who would fulfill it. It might have been about Lunaya once, but her path shifted.” His mouth tightened. “The words could have fit Medra, too—if she hadn’t accepted the dwarves’ quest and gone belowground.”

“I don’t understand,” I whispered. “Then, why me?”

His gaze met mine, weary and so full of sorrow. “Because you are the one standing here now, with the power.”

I let out an incredulous laugh. “Power? What power?”

“If we do nothing, the Veil will fall,” he said quietly, the words landing like arrows. Behind us, Catherine made a strangled sound. “If it falls, what Catherine expects to happen won’t happen the way she thinks. She and Marcus and Viktor wanted power. They thought the Veil’s fall would mean

conquest and dominion. But if it collapses …" he breathed in "… it will mean death. Countless deaths. Or worse."

"Worse? How?" Kage demanded.

"Both worlds may simply tear apart and vanish," Lysander said quietly. "It could mean the end of everything."

"No," I murmured.

"That's not going to happen," Kage snapped forcefully.

Lysander gave us a broken sort of a smile. "I don't want to believe it either." He looked at me. "We still have a choice."

"What choice?" I desperately wanted to believe that there was another way.

"We can leave," Lysander said gently. "We can turn our backs on all of this and pretend none of it ever happened. We can go back to Bloodwing. Back to Persis."

I looked at him, incredulous. "For how long? How long until … the end?"

He shrugged. "Days. Hours. No one can say." He gestured to Catherine. "Despite what she might think. She doesn't really know."

I thought of Persis disappearing into nothingness before he'd even had the chance to really live. "No. We can't do that."

Lysander's eyes were peaceful. "I know. But I love you. And I want you to know you have a choice. I will follow you, wherever you go, whatever you decide."

My breath caught. I looked at Kage. At the way his jaw was clenched so very hard. At the way he was holding himself so still. I slipped my hand into his. "Tell me the rest. What do we have to do?"

Catherine suddenly erupted. "No, no, no," she shrieked. "There is no other way. Don't you fucking dare. You don't understand."

Kage swore and let go of my hand. He moved to her, catching her wrists with one hand as he yanked a cord from one pocket with the other. He bound her as she kicked and writhed and spat. She kept screaming. Warnings and curses. Half truths and half madness. Kage ripped a strip from Catherine's own bloodied skirt hem and jammed it between her teeth, then tied it behind her head as she bucked and thrashed. Then he rose, breathing hard, and came back over to us. "Keep talking," he said to Lysander.

My other consort nodded. “The Veil was maintained. Fortified over generations by willing sacrifices.” He met my eyes. “Blake’s mother was one.”

My mouth went dry. “She’s … in there?”

“She isn’t alive,” he said, gently, as if to reassure me. “She gave herself to the Veil. Feeding it with her life. It’s not as terrible as it sounds.”

But it sounded pretty fucking terrible to me. At the very least it sounded like death. I glanced at Kage. His face was white. “Is there a way for us to stop this?” I asked. “To save Persis? To save everyone?”

“You’ve never read the full prophecy,” Lysander said. He recited, “*As the Veil grows thin, she shall approach: the woman who has crossed over and stood against the darkness. Thrice defiant and thrice bound by blood, she walks where others cannot tread. In her hands shall lie the fate of many realms, for the Veil shall be sustained by her dying or undone by her living. The world may not endure nor the tyrant be defeated should she refuse the call. You will know her, for the dragon has marked her and called her his own. The marked maiden shall offer the blood of the four.*”

I touched a hand to my throat. “Marked.”

Lysander’s fingers trailed over mine. “Marked. And pure of heart.”

“She *stood against the darkness*.” Kage’s voice was tired. “She killed Viktor.”

Every decision I’d made. Everything that had been done to me. Had all of those things really brought me here, to this place, to this choice?

“It’s not about the words fitting perfectly,” Lysander said softly. “But …” His voice trailed off.

“The four,” I said.

He nodded. “Drakharrow. Avari. Orphos.” He glanced at Catherine, bound and gagged a little ways off. “And Mortis. The four most powerful bloodlines in our world.”

“I’m not a true Drakharrow,” I said, my voice small.

“The Pansera line can be traced back to Drakharrow. And you were Viktor’s consort.” Lysander hesitated. “It should be … enough.”

My heartbeat was loud in my ears. I looked at Kage first. Then back at Lysander. The world had narrowed so sharply, to the space between just us three. A sound wrenched from my throat. Half laugh, half sob. Kage’s face was full of sorrow. It hurt me to look at it.

“I’m sorry,” Lysander whispered.

I touched his cheek. “You’ve been carrying this burden all alone. I’m sorry, too.” I wiped at my eyes with the back of my hand and realized I was shaking.

Kage moved closer to me, wrapping his arms around my body. Then he reached for Lysander, drawing the other man in.

“We do it together,” he said firmly.

Lysander made a wounded sound. He leaned his head against ours. “Together.”

Hot tears spilled down my face. I thought back to the life I’d led. One of privilege. One of pain. I was supposed to marry well, have children, and throw parties. Instead, I’d been thrown away by one man, then captured in cruelty by another. I’d been mistreated and abused. And then I’d been saved and shown pure grace. I’d tasted power, and I’d tasted cruelty. I’d learned they weren’t for me.

I’d tried to change. I’d hoped it would be enough.

I looked at my consorts. “I never expected this. I never dreamed there could be this kind of love.” My throat tightened. “Both of you are … good men.”

Lysander let out a shaky breath that was almost a sob.

“I love you both,” I went on. “I’m grateful for everything we had, no matter how short it was.” I forced a smile through my tears. “Every time you wouldn’t leave my room. Every time you walked me to my office. Every time you both looked at me like I was worth protecting.” My voice broke. “I didn’t know how much I needed you. How my heart had been waiting for you.”

Kage kissed me then—a sob on his lips as they met mine, hard and desperate. Lysander’s hands were in my hair. When Kage broke the kiss, Lysander’s lips were there to take their place. I watched the two men embrace, their lips entwine. I marveled one last time at the beauty of it.

We moved apart but together, clasping hands. Kage bent and hauled Catherine up beside him as she struggled, muffled screams pouring from behind her gag. We didn’t even look at her. The last faces I wanted in my mind were my mates’.

Lysander squeezed my hand. I squeezed back. We walked toward the Veil and stepped into the dark.

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Epilogue

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CHAPTER 69

MEDRA



One Year Later

Bloodwing Academy

I stood in the middle of the room I shared with Blake in Drak-harrow Tower, half-dressed and swearing at a gown. “Who designed this thing? It’s a complete nightmare.”

Blake chuckled from behind me. “I did, and you know it. I’d offer to help, but I’m enjoying the show.”

Springrise term had just ended. Tonight was the Graduation Ball. I twisted to glare at him. The gown hanging around my waist, I tripped on the long skirt and nearly lost my balance. Blake stood by a desk near the entrance, fastening the cuffs of his dress shirt. He wore all black tonight, except for a waistcoat accented in gold and silver—a small nod to Orphos and Avari. His golden blond hair fell straight and loose, almost to his chin. He swept it up into a high bun and tied it with black ribbon. He looked like sin and trouble.

Blake caught me staring and smirked. “Like what you see, Pendragon?”

I shrugged casually. “I suppose.” I knew if I said *yes*, he’d kiss me, and then we’d never leave the room.

With a sigh, I turned back around, trying to pull up the bodice of my dress. The upper portion was made of fitted boned dark plum satin. Tiny silver crescent moons and small gold suns had been embroidered across the fabric. The skirt was a giant poufy thing of white and pale lavender tulle, billowing out like layers of spun sugar. The bodice slipped down my chest again, and I made a sound of annoyance. What sleeves the gown had were

small pieces of purple satin that hung off my shoulders—more for show than for support.

"These buttons are too small for my fingers," I complained. "Who did they think this dress was for, a child or a grown woman?"

Blake crossed the room and came to stand behind me. He reached down, tugging the bodice up gently and then worked his fingers deftly at the buttons. "The dressmaker who helped me design this is considered an expert in her field, I'll have you know."

I glanced toward the corner where a stack of bags were packed and waiting. Another piece of luggage lay open on the bed, half-filled with folded clothes.

Blake finished with the last button and laid his hands gently on my waist. "There. Perfect." He rested his head on my shoulder, and I looked at us in the mirror.

I touched one of the tiny golden suns on my embroidered bodice. "It feels strange to be wearing colors again." We'd both been in full mourning for more than a year. I'd grown used to black.

"It's time," Blake said softly.

I nodded. For a moment, I let myself think about them. Regan with her barbed tongue and elegance. Kage with his cryptic words and dark brown eyes. He'd always seemed to speak to me in half riddles. But when I'd needed him, he'd always been there. I'd known Lysander the least, but I knew he'd been calm as winter, full of wisdom, and stronger than anyone had ever seemed to realize.

They were all gone now. And part of me still couldn't believe it.

No one would ever know exactly what they had done at the Veil. They'd left no notes, no records. We only knew that they had gone after Catherine Mortis. And they did not return. We knew that the Veil had not fallen—but that the plague had ceased.

There were many theories. Some more realistic than others. I knew Blake believed the three of them had become part of the Veil—along with his mother and, yes, even Catherine. He said he'd seen them all once, in a dream. Blake wasn't usually one for believing much in the power of dreams or birth signs; he wasn't a very fanciful person, so I wanted to believe him. Wanted to believe that maybe, just maybe, something of the ones we'd lost were still out there somehow. Their spirits. Their memories. Whatever you wanted to call it. Just … something.

Elaria was gone, too—she'd died in the wave of plague that struck Veilmar. She'd died without even knowing her grandson had become one of Sangratha's greatest heroes. They were all gone: Elaria, Viktor, Marcus, Catherine. All of the monsters were dead, the old alliances shattered.

A power vacuum had formed almost overnight, and for a brief while, it had seemed Sangratha would not be able to avoid a civil war. But then the Veilmar City Council had stepped up. It had become something stronger and more permanent—evolving into a coalition of influential blightborn and ambitious, liberal-minded highbloods. The council had taken over all the work the regency had been doing. And Gabriel Rodriguez, gods help us all, had been elected council chairperson.

In the south, the changes had been good ones. The imbalanced class system, where highbloods took and blightborns gave, was slowly but surely changing. Veilmar had recently passed new laws in which use of compulsion or coercion, including thrall-weave, was being treated as a crime. Feeding from anyone unwilling was now considered assault. Feeding from minors was entirely banned. Debt-based feeding contracts—in other words, the entire thrall system—were being reviewed. Rodriguez was pushing to have them outlawed. Instead, highbloods were being encouraged to visit licensed locations where they could pay blightborns fairly for their blood donations. Healers were also setting up clinics with blood reserves in major cities, starting with Veilmar.

Of course, there had been some resistance to the changes, and the new options weren't as widespread or available outside of the capital. But they were a start.

Feeding within consensual bonds had become many younger highbloods' preference. Mixed highblood–blightborn relationships had become something of a trend over this past year. I was sure Viktor Drakharrow would be thrilled if he were here to see it all.

In the north, change was more gradual. Many smaller towns and villages had been devastated by the plague, especially the region around the Bonewood. Whole villages had been emptied. Rebuilding would take years.

All over Sangratha, the rot had not simply vanished. Certain magazines and newspapers, no doubt bankrolled by highblood elites, continued to print articles harkening back to the *good old days of the stable regency*. Some decried a lack of *noble* leadership. Others had even begun to mythologize Viktor and his memory, claiming everything had been better under his rule.

They used words like *safer* and *more orderly*. But it was easy to read between the lines—what they really meant was safer for highbloods and more orderly only in the sense that blightborns had been more easy to exploit.

Rodriguez had told me that was why he was creating a new archive. “Memory is political. We need to record the past so we don’t repeat it,” he’d told me, wagging a finger in my face like I was still in one of his classes.

Sangratha had been built with fear and blood. Its entire state religion was predicated on the belief that some people were born to rule and others were born to be used. You couldn’t erase all of that in one year, but Bloodwing was proof that you could start. For instance, Professor Elizabeth Briggs now taught a course called Blightborn History over the Ages. It was mandatory: Every student at Bloodwing had to take the course and pass it before being approved to graduate.

Other policies had shifted. Blightborn students were no longer conscripted into attending the academy, nor were they sentenced to death or servitude for academic failure. The admissions process was being completely overhauled. Starting this term, students now applied to the house of their choosing. If they weren’t accepted into their first choice, they could be considered for their second. Of course, there was still favoritism and political games to be played, but overall blightborn students had at least a semblance of choice now.

House Mortis still stood. Some believed the entire house should be dismantled and renamed. The subject had been hotly debated all year, but for now, Mortis remained. Personally, I still wasn’t sure what should happen. Erasing the house from the school would not erase the bloodline which still existed—nor what had been done in House Mortis’s name. But suffice it to say that House Mortis hadn’t received many new applications that year.

“You look very far away, little dragon. Where did you go?” Blake murmured, his breath warm on my cheek.

I looked up to see he’d moved away. He’d finished dressing and now stood, leaning against a bedpost. I forced a smile. “Just thinking.”

Whenever I let them, my thoughts went to Hawl. We’d buried them where they’d fallen. Sometimes I deeply regretted that—I couldn’t even visit their grave. Were they lonely beneath the ground?

A knock sounded at the door just as I finished fastening my earrings, two dangling golden fluffins. Blake came toward me. He lifted my chin, tipping my head up. His eyes searched my face like he was checking for cracks.

I leaned into his touch with a sigh. “I’m all right.” It wasn’t precisely true. But it had to be for tonight.

His thumb brushed my jaw. “A change of scenery will do you good.”

The knock came again. “Come in, Visha,” I called.

The door swung open, and she strode in. Her short silver hair was slicked back on one side and razored on the other. She was wearing a tailored pantsuit of red silk that clung to her petite, athletic frame. The front plunged low in a completely outrageous, very deep *V* that showed off a great deal of cleavage. And when she turned to close the door, I saw the back dipped just as low—exposing smooth brown skin and the very top curve of her ass. She smirked when she caught us both looking.

“Trouble has arrived,” Blake announced, giving a low whistle.

“Nothing new, then.” Visha tilted her head cockily as she swept her violet eyes over us in assessment.

“Did I clean up sufficiently?” Blake asked, tugging at his lapels.

“You look all right,” she said dismissively. Her eyes softened as she looked at me. “Regan would love that dress.”

“I wish she was here to wear it instead,” I said, as my chest tightened.

“Funny that we’re all thinking that, isn’t it?” Visha said softly. “At one time or another I’m pretty sure we would have liked nothing better than to stab her in her pretty little face.”

“That outfit,” Blake said, quickly changing the subject and gesturing to the crimson concoction clinging to Visha’s body, “what is this, Vish? Excited to see your beau?” Visha’s fist caught him square in the arm before he could move. He yelped dramatically. “Fuck! Dammit, woman. I was trying to pay you a compliment.”

I laughed and moved toward the door, smoothing my skirt and reaching for a small purse covered in jet black beads. “It will be nice to see Kazmyn.”

Visha rolled her eyes, but her cheeks had a slight tinge of rose to them. “He’s a menace. Can’t believe they’re really letting him come teach here.”

“Visiting Assistant Professor of Dwarven Construction and Scouting Techniques,” Blake drawled. “Quite the mouthful.”

“He probably gave himself that title,” Visha snapped.

“Does that mean you won’t be giving him an opportunity to taste sweet highblood fangs tonight?” Blake asked. Then he dashed out into the hall ahead of us with a holler of laughter before Visha could hit him again.



When we reached the refectory, music was already spilling out into the hall. Inside, the room was once again transformed into something elegant and opulent. All four house banners hung proudly from the walls. Long tables had been set up along the edges of the room in each of the house colors. Fourth Years and Fifth Years filled the room, decked out in finery, some parading about with drinks in hand, others already out on the dance floor. Faculty mingled with parents, and I saw dignitaries from across Sangratha wearing various highblood house colors. Many blightborn of influence were in attendance from Veilmar, too, council members and guild leaders, healers and merchants.

I reached for Blake’s hand. “Still doing all right?” he murmured.

I looked up at him and nodded. How could I not be with him on my arm? He looked devastatingly handsome tonight. His silk cravat was sitting just a little crooked. I reached up and fixed it. He caught my hand and kissed my fingers, but I saw his gaze had turned absent. He was looking over toward the stage, his jaw suddenly tight.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “You’re going to be fine.”

“Blake hates speeches,” Visha said.

He scowled. “I do hate speeches.”

I smiled. “Yes, but you rehearsed this one. Remember? And you have notes.”

He groaned. “Sure, but I’m not used to it being so formal.”

“He means he’s used to just bellowing down the stairs into the Common Room and having everyone snap to attention and do whatever he says,” Visha translated.

Blake grinned. “Well, basically.”

“Those days are over,” I reminded him, touching his cheek.

He leaned down and kissed me lightly on the lips. “And new ones lie ahead.”

Visha made a disgusted sound. “I’m going to mingle.”

“She’s going to suck Kazmyn,” Blake whispered loudly.

“Not dignifying that with a response,” Visha called over her shoulder, raising her hand in a rude gesture.

As we made our way farther into the room, some students stopped Blake to congratulate him. Others asked about our plans for the summer. Then the music began to die down. Blake pulled me through the crowd to the front of the room where Headmaster Sebastian Sankara was stepping up onto the stage and moving to stand behind a podium. Wearing a long black robe, he looked handsome and dignified. His silver beard had been perfectly trimmed. His single gold hoop earring gleamed in his right ear.

“Most pirate-y headmaster Bloodwing will ever have,” Blake whispered in my ear.

“We should get him a parrot,” I whispered back.

Blake made a choking sound as Sankara began his speech. His deep resonant voice easily carried throughout the hall. “Students, faculty, honored guests, families, and friends, thank you for joining us tonight.” He paused, looking out at us all. “This has been a challenging year.” He gave a faint smile, and there was a small ripple of laughter.

I held very still, my arm linked through Blake’s.

Sankara continued, his expression turning solemn. “For many, it has been one of loss. For all of us, it has been one of upheaval and change. A year in which Bloodwing Academy—which I would argue represents, in many ways, the heart of Sangratha itself—was called to become something more than we ever dreamed it could be.”

His eyes traveled over the crowd. “Students from this school have shown extraordinary courage and resilience. They have become the change many never believed possible. Some gave more than any of us had the right to ask of them. Some made the ultimate sacrifice for this realm and for their fellow students.”

No one moved. I thought of Lunaya and Regan, of Kage and Lysander. I thought of wise teachers and mentors, like Magda and Hawl. I thought of a golden dragon and my mother.

Sankara had bowed his head for a moment; now he looked up. “We will honor them not only with our grief but with what we choose to build next.” His warm, steady eyes moved over us all. “The future is not a thing to be feared simply because it is uncertain. It is a thing of hope. Despite all we have endured, I still find myself looking forward to the year to come.”

There was applause. First soft, then stronger. When it had died down, Sankara went on. “Now, before we return to the food and to the music, I’d like to call up a student—no,” he corrected himself, “a brand new alumnus. One who I doubt requires any introduction. Still, he deserves one. Please join me in welcoming Blake Drakharrow.”

A ripple moved through the room as all heads began to turn toward where I stood beside Blake. “You’ve got this,” I murmured to him.

Blake stood at the podium, resplendent in black and silver and gold. He looked beautiful—but also uncomfortable. I watched him set his notes down and stare at them. He shuffled them, then cleared his throat. “Right.” He tapped the pages. “I have this all written out. Which, for those of you who know me well, should tell you how seriously I’m taking it.”

That earned him a laugh. I felt myself smile. He glanced down at us, his jaw still tight. Then his eyes landed on mine. I held his gaze and watched his shoulders relax a little. The tension in his face seemed to ease.

He took a deep breath, and when he spoke again, his voice was steadier. “Bloodwing has been my home for what feels like a very long time. It wasn’t always an easy one. And it was definitely not perfect. But it was home to me, all the same.”

The room had gone very quiet.

“I grew up in these towers. I learned how to fight in these halls. I got in trouble. Repeatedly.” He gave a low laugh, and the crowd laughed with him. “But I also learned a lot, too. I spent years as House Leader of Drakharrow,” he continued. “And if you’re wondering if I was good at the job, well … let’s just say there was a lot of yelling.”

Students at the Drakharrow table stomped and hollered. I heard a few shouts of “We love you, Blake!” Up at the podium, Blake flushed and grinned.

“There may have been a few threats. A little property damage.” He grimaced. “A few decisions I wish I’d never made.” His face sobered, and he looked out at the crowd. “But overall, I guess Bloodwing taught me what leadership is supposed to be. And it wasn’t always what I thought. It’s not about power, and it’s not about fear. It’s about service. It’s about sacrifice and protecting people who need you, even when there’s a cost.”

His eyes moved to find Theo in the crowd where he stood next to Vaughn. Blake’s expression changed as he looked out at his cousin. I saw fierce pride.

“It’s my honor to stand here tonight as I appoint the next House Leader for Drakharrow. Theo Drakharrow is one of the bravest men I know. He’s fought for this school, for those he loves, and maybe most importantly, for himself. He’s fought hard even when it cost him. And so to me, he’s always represented hope.”

Tears ran down Theo’s face. I saw Vaughn wrap his arms around Theo’s waist, his own face lit up with quiet pride.

“Please join me in welcoming Theo to the position. It won’t be an easy one, cuz. You might need a bullhorn sometimes.”

The room erupted in applause and laughter. Visha gave such a piercing whistle I saw a few people flinch. This was it. The start of a new tradition. No longer would House Leaders have to kill for the honor. They’d be chosen.

Finally, Blake lifted a hand for quiet. “There’s just one more thing.” He glanced down at his notes, and I saw a little of the tension return. “And this one really matters to me.” When he lifted his head again, his eyes were brighter than before. “I’d like to announce a new scholarship. It will be awarded each year to two female First Year students, one highblood and one blightborn, who show extraordinary promise and potential.” He swallowed. “It will be called the Regan Pansera Award.”

A hush fell over the room. Then Sankara began to clap loudly—and everyone joined in.



The Graduation Ball was in full swing. Blake pulled me onto the dance floor. His hands settled at my waist as I twined my arms around his neck. Around us, Bloodwing glittered. And the best thing of all was that I knew Viktor Drakharrow wouldn’t be breathing down Blake’s neck. Tonight, Bloodwing didn’t feel like a battlefield. It felt like a school again.

“You did good up there,” I murmured.

He grimaced. “I think I blacked out for most of it.”

I laughed. I looked around the room as we moved slowly to the melody. I caught sight of Visha, sitting at the Drakharrow table. She had one leg crossed over the other, the red silk catching the light, as Kazmyn leaned in,

grinning like he'd just said something he thought was charming. Visha was rolling her eyes, but I caught a smirk beginning to blossom on her lips.

A group of dancers passed between us, blocking them from view. I saw Theo and Vaughn drift past, Theo's hands wrapped around Vaughn's waist, and Vaughn's head dipped low. He was saying something to Theo I couldn't hear. They were smiling at each other with a quiet tenderness that told me the rest of the room might as well have disappeared.

"Hurts to be snubbed," Blake joked. "Right after I honored him, too." His face softened. "Shit, Pendragon. I really never thought it could be like this."

I touched his cheek. "You're emotional tonight."

"Don't you dare tell anyone."

Before I could tease him anymore, though, a pair of dancers moved up alongside us—Rodriguez and Sankara. I looked at them with amusement. Rodriguez's tie was already crooked. His hair looked like he'd run his hands through it at least ten times. By contrast, Sankara looked as immaculate as ever. They danced well together, like they'd been doing it forever.

"So, you two really leaving us tomorrow morning?" Rodriguez asked.

Blake nodded. "All packed up."

I rolled my eyes. *I* was packed. His packing was a work in progress.

Sankara tipped his head down. "Before you go, there's something you should see in the Dragon Court."

"All right," Blake said, frowning in puzzlement. "We'll check it out before we turn in." But the two of them were already drifting away with the music. Blake looked down at me. "Should we be worried?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. But now I'm curious."

We only stayed a little longer after that. Then, before anyone else could pull us into another dance or wish Blake congratulations again, we slipped out. The noise of the ball faded as we walked side by side through the quiet corridors. Eventually we reached the cloisters that bordered the Dragon Court. The night air was warm and smelled like summer. But I suddenly shivered anyway.

Blake shrugged off his jacket before I could even say a word. He draped it over my shoulders. It held his warmth and the scent of him: mint and green apples, yes, but with a hint of something just a bit darker—and perhaps draconic.

“Thank you,” I murmured, pulling it around me. We stepped out from beneath the arches and stopped.

“Fuck,” Blake whispered.

The court had been cleared of rubble, and new sculptures had been erected. There were five altogether. Four of them formed a wide, protective, semicircle. They were massive—as large as the dragon ones had been. One was a wolf, carved in pale silver stone, head lifted in watchfulness—or as if to look up at the moon. Beside it rose a black dragon, obsidian wings furled behind its back. It looked regal and dangerous. Across from the dragon, formed from bronze, stood a tall, armored bear. My throat began to tighten. Hawl.

Lastly, not at all true-to-size but absolutely true-to-ego, was a gigantic fluffin cast in gold. It sat up straight, eyes bright and wide, with its tail curled around its feet.

My heart clenched as I saw the fourth statue that sat in the center of the three.

This one was bronze. Three figures had been cast together. A woman stood hand in hand and back to back with two men, the three of them forming a kind of a triangle, as if facing the world head on from every side. The sculptor hadn’t included any identifying details. There were no colors, no house insignias. Yet as I stepped closer I recognized the tilt of the woman’s chin, the proud set of her shoulders. The silky smoothness of her long hair.

Blake came up beside me. He let out a long breath. “The one on the left looks like Kage.”

My eyes moved to the other man. Slightly leaner. Elegant even in bronze. “And Lysander.”

At the base of the sculpture was a plaque. It had just one line on it. *Ex Sanguine Unitas.* It was part of Bloodwing’s motto.

“*From blood, unity,*” Blake said, his hand finding mine.

I nodded, too moved to speak. Neither of us said anything else. After a while, we turned and walked out of the Dragon Court together, his hand still warm in mine.

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CHAPTER 70

BLAKE



A Few Days Later

Somnaria Institute, Sable Isles

We'd taken our time crossing western Sangratha. Sometimes we'd set up camp on a quiet beach. Sometimes we'd stop in a village and check into an inn. We were treating it like a vacation of sorts, just two young newlyweds who'd graduated from school and had their whole futures ahead of them.

Pendragon flew on my back each day, with Neville beside her. Our essentials were in a backpack strapped to Pendragon's back. All of Neville's were in a tiny pouch she'd managed to get him to wear on his. It was padded nicely so he'd taken to flipping onto his back and using it as a kind of pillow half the time.

Now, a week after leaving Bloodwing, we were standing in the library of the Somnaria Institute. "Damn," I remarked. "Orphos really does make everything prettier."

Pendragon smacked me. "Shhh."

My voice had echoed, and a few students were looking up curiously from where they sat, hard at work at tables littered with papers and books. But it was true: Bloodwing was all stone and dark wood, whereas Somnaria had more space and light to it. The library was all pale honey-colored shelves and prettily carved little balconies. One entire wall of the place was floor-to-ceiling windows, some of them open to let in a warm sea breeze. Beyond the windows was a broad terrace, lined with shrubs and covered with low white tables. Past that I could see flowering gardens and glittering blue

water. There was also a café. I watched some students stroll away from its counter carrying mugs of steaming kava and plates of fresh-baked treats.

“They get treats here? Why don’t we have more treats?” I complained.

I glanced over at Pendragon. She was looking around at everything with wide eyes, looking like a tourist—which we both were. She seemed so damn happy. All of the wind and sun over the last few days had put more color in her face. I loved how more freckles had cropped up across her cheeks, the dots contrasting against her tanned skin. Her curls, lightened a little from the sun, were pulled back with a dark ribbon; now some parts were streaked to a light gold, and others were copper from where the light had baked them. She looked beautiful. But more than beautiful, she looked at peace. Seeing her like that made my chest unclench a little.

“We have a café,” she reminded me. “And you sound like Neville right now.” Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

“I’m just saying Bloodwing could use more snacks. If we’d had more snacks, I might’ve been a better student,” I protested.

She snorted. Before I could crack a joke about being her little fluffin, I saw a familiar figure emerging from the stacks. Florence Shen’s dark brown eyes lit up as she saw us. She hurried forward, one hand on the curve of her belly, one hand impatiently pushing her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. Pendragon made a little exclamation and took off running.

I studied Florence; she looked very pretty. I’d heard pregnancy was not a pleasant experience for many women, but in her case, it had definitely given her that special glow. Her skin was radiant, her long dark hair bright and glossy. She wore it braided and pinned up around her head in delicate loops in a style I’d never seen before. Maybe it was an Orphos trend, like the way high-bloods here liked to add colors to their hair. Overall, Florence was looking much less like a student and more like a professor these days. Her outfit was elegant and scholarly—a creamy blouse with a ruffled collar and tiny pearl buttons layered beneath a royal blue pinafore-style dress. The dress’s skirt was long and full, and it flowed over her widening stomach, before hitting sensible brown leather lace-up boots.

Pendragon reached her, and soon the two of them were holding onto one another like they were afraid the other might vanish.

“I can’t believe you’re really here!” Florence laughed, tears on her cheeks. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“We’re here,” Pendragon said, her voice shaking. “Florence—I can’t believe it. Just look at you!”

“I know,” Florence replied. “I’m huge, aren’t I?”

“You’re perfect,” Pendragon reassured her. She tucked a loose piece of Florence’s hair behind her ear gently. “You’re even more beautiful. You’re going to be such a wonderful mother.”

I hung back, letting them have their moment. Neville had been draped over my shoulders like I was a piece of furniture. That murder bear had completely spoiled him, and now he was used to the special treatment. Now he lifted his head, ears shooting up, and gave a loud yip. I saw a creamy blur shoot out from behind a bookcase.

“Oh, no,” Florence groaned. “Here we go again.” She held onto Pendragon’s arm. “Brace yourself.”

Pendragon looked as mystified as I felt, but the reason was soon plain to see as Nell came racing over, paws skidding on the polished white marble floor. She dashed right under Florence’s skirts, emerging on the other side with her fur a little fluffier than before, and skidded to a halt at my feet. Before I could even react, Neville sprang from my arms. The two fluffins met in a mix of tails and nose-bumps and high-pitched yips.

“They sure sniff one another a lot,” I observed. I glanced at Pendragon and Florence, but they were lost in conversation again.

“Do not even think of sniffing my wife,” a dry voice said behind me.

I turned to see Nyxaris approaching. Even when he wasn’t in dragon form, he was a damned formidable-looking man. He looked extremely polished today in a formal black suit cut in an old-fashioned style, with a fitted pinstriped waistcoat and crisp white linen shirt underneath. His long silver hair was tied back at the nape.

I turned back, intending to compliment Florence on how well she was looking, but the two women had already disappeared. They’d moved out onto the terrace, their arms linked.

“Chaos demons,” Nyxaris complained, as he watched the two fluffins follow the women out onto the terrace and begin chasing one another through the legs of various tables, ignoring the people sitting at them.

“I know it’s a little late, but congratulations on your … forth-coming progeny?” I wasn’t actually sure what people were supposed to say in these situations. It wasn’t as if many of my friends had had babies yet. Florence was the first.

Nyxaris looked amused. “Thank you.” He folded his hands behind his back. “Florence is hoping it won’t be a dragon.”

I choked so hard I started to cough. “What? Is that a possibility? I thought …”

Nyxaris’s face remained impassive for one more moment. Then he broke into a deep, rich laugh and clapped me on the back.

“Damn, Blake. Your face.” He chuckled again.

“That’s not funny,” I complained, my face hot. I scowled. “There should be pamphlets. Some sort of a book you can read.”

“I’m working on a book,” Nyxaris said complacently.

I raised a brow. “Really?”

He nodded. “Though, I’m not sure it will include all the content you need.” He still looked amused. The bastard. “Florence’s mother suggested it. I know it’s rather self-indulgent, but the truth is that most knowledge about dragons was destroyed over the last century.”

“I can’t think of anyone better to write a book on the subject,” I said truthfully. “Have there been many books about dragons written by, um, dragons before?”

“There used to be many,” he said, still perfectly composed. “But again, all were destroyed.”

I thought of the eggs we’d found, and then of Molindra and Alabryss. If the knowledge hadn’t been lost, their offspring might have had the chance to read books written by their mothers one day.

A crash of what sounded like breaking dishes came from the vicinity of the terrace, followed by delighted yapping. I groaned. “It’s like we already have children.”

“I assure you, my real children will have better manners,” Nyxaris declared. He marched toward the doors, then paused, tilting his head slightly as if listening for something. He looked back at me. “I hope you weren’t expecting a quiet afternoon?”

I grinned. “Not at all.” I followed him outside into the warm seaside air.

Pendragon and Florence were seated at a table near the edge of the terrace. Flowers spilled over the edge of the stone balustrade beside them, vibrantly colored and fragrant. I saw lavender, roses, and a little blue flower I didn’t know the name of.

The two women were no longer alone. A boy had run up and now stood at Florence’s side with a hand on her shoulder, panting. I smiled as I

recognized Persis. He was taller than the last time I'd seen him, gangly in that awkward way boys tended to become for a few years before they hit actual manhood.

I knew Persis was living at Somnaria now. Nyxaris had exchanged strong words with Lord Pansera when he'd tried to come and claim the boy last year at Bloodwing. Nyxaris had pointed out that if Regan's father was going to use his child as no better than a hostage to gain favor with noble houses, then what better place for Persis than with the only Duskdrake in the land? It hadn't really been so much of a question. Persis's mother hadn't shown up to see him at all. It made me wonder just what kind of an upbringing Regan had really had with those sorts of parents. It was too late to talk to her about it now. But it had made me realize that some of her cruel ways hadn't really been natural to her at all.

I realized Persis hadn't arrived alone. "Holy shit," I breathed.

A hatchling the size of a very large hound sat in the shadow of Florence's chair. Its scales gleamed warm gold. Its wings hadn't fully grown in. They were small, delicate-looking things, folded awkwardly at its sides.

"You didn't tell us one had hatched," I said, looking at Nyxaris accusingly.

He shrugged. "I think Florence wanted to surprise you both." He glanced at the baby dragon and cleared his throat. "We've been calling her Molly."

"Molly? For *Molindra*," I guessed.

He nodded, blushing slightly as if he was worried I was going to say it was not a noble-enough name for a dragon. Considering my Inferni name, I wasn't about to complain about Molly's.

"Her wings are still small. She hasn't mastered flight."

"Blake!" Persis had finally noticed us. His eyes lit up. "Did you see my dragon?"

Nyxaris rolled his eyes. "She is not *your* dragon."

"Right, but she likes me the best," Persis bragged. "She follows me everywhere. Even to bed."

I glanced at Nyxaris, hiding a smile. The hatchling stepped forward, her eyes bright and intelligent. Then she sneezed in a puff of warm gold sparks. A student at a nearby table hastily gathered their books and evacuated.

I laughed. "I hope she's got the flame-wielding under control." I thought of something. "Is this the only one that hatched? How are the other eggs?"

Florence flushed guiltily. "There are three."

“Three?” I exclaimed. “Three baby dragons? Where are the others?”

“They’re very small,” she explained. “The other two are in the nursery. We have someone with them at all times.”

I pulled out a chair from the recently vacated table across from them and slumped into it. “Three dragons.” I gestured to Molly. “And she’s just … walking around?”

“We haven’t kept her a secret.” Florence bit her lip. “Things are very different in the Sable Isles. Everyone adores Molly.”

“Sure, but this will spread outside of the Sable Isles soon,” I said. “What then?”

Nyxaris had taken a seat across from me. “It will certainly be a matter of much discussion.”

I coughed. “Discussion? It’s going to cause riots. Political crises. New religions. You know the dwarves worship dragons, right?” We’d realized that eventually after a few of the things Zaira and Kazmyn had said belowground.

“Better than worshiping highbloods,” Nyxaris said, narrowing his eyes.

I thought about that for a second. “You might have a point.” At least, unless the dragons became just as tyrannical. I was really going to have to take a look at that memoir Nyxaris was writing.

“I am putting together a curriculum for them.”

I stared. “What? You’re sending the baby dragons to school?”

“Of course.” Nyxaris looked offended. “You of all people should know these are highly intelligent beings. They’ll require careful training, a knowledge of their own history. Not to mention lessons in restraint and discipline.” He glanced at Molly, who had discovered a piece of pastry left unattended on a nearby table and was swallowing it whole. “A great deal of discipline.”

“Oh no, Molly, don’t do that. You know it’ll only make you sick later,” Florence said with distress as she noticed.

“Blake is right, though,” Pendragon said slowly. “What will the rest of Sangratha do when they learn there are not just one but four dragons here?”

Nyxaris frowned. “They’ll stay away, if they know what’s good for them.”

There was quiet for a long moment. Then the subject was quickly changed. Food and drinks were brought to the table. The afternoon stretched out, mellow and golden. Around us, tables filled and emptied.

Sometimes a student or staff member would come up and greet Florence or Nyxaris, and Pendragon and I would be briefly introduced. I knew Nyxaris had been working as an instructor at the school.

The Somnaria Institute, in contrast to Bloodwing, was not a war college; it was primarily a research institution. House Orphos valued knowledge and learning. Even though Lunaya and Lysander were gone, that tradition seemed in no danger of changing. From what I understood, Somnaria had been quick to leap at the chance to have a Duskdrake teaching classes on dragon history and anatomy. Meanwhile, Florence had left her studies at Bloodwing and was doing graduate-level work in alchemy and restoration magic under the mentorship of Dr. Meghal Patel, a professor who had been close friends with Vasanti Allenvale.

By the time Florence's mother came to join us, the afternoon light was beginning to fade. Jia Shen brought a companion with her. An older blightborn woman of perhaps fifty or so, with a striking sharp-featured face and warm brown eyes. Jia introduced her to us as Reba Wells, a professor of religion and mythology.

"Call me Reb," Professor Wells said, smiling warmly at us. Reba was a highblood. Her pale blond hair was cropped short and had bright purple streaks in it. She wore a beautifully tailored gold suit, and when she sat down I saw her socks were bright purple to match her hair. They stayed with us for a while, conversation settling into an easy rhythm. Eventually Jia and Reba stood up and hustled Persis and Molly off with them for supper.

Before she left, Jia squeezed Pendragon's hand, then mine, too. "It's good to have you both here."

"It's good to be here," I said, a little shyly.

The sea had gone a deeper blue now. Across the terrace, staff were rearranging the tables and chairs. Florence had explained that there were concerts most evenings and sometimes poetry recitals. I was hoping tonight wasn't going to be poetry.

I realized Nyxaris was looking between Pendragon and me.

"I imagine you two would like to see what you came here for?"

"We came to see all of you," Pendragon pointed out. She glanced at me. "But yes, that might be a good idea."

They led us back through the library and then into the school, down quiet corridors and then to a staircase that led down to the lower level. Finally,

Florence pushed open a heavy door and we entered a large, high-ceilinged laboratory. I saw tables covered with notebooks and tablets, coils of wire and tools that seemed to be dwarven. At the far end of the room stood two arches, one of pale white stone. I knew it had been recovered from the O'Rourke estate. Its opening was empty and its surface was dull. The other arch was much newer, of a pale green stone that I knew had come from Thrazdummar. Runes were inscribed across its surface.

"Kazmyn and I did most of the work," Florence said, crossing the room to stand near the green arch. "But we had a lot of help. We had a lengthy correspondence going with scholars of runic history from the University of Thrazdummar." She bit her lip. "I don't know if we got everything right."

Pendragon stepped up to stand beside her. Her face was very calm. "It will work. My fae blood should help, especially now that my powers are returning. At one time, I didn't even need an archway, you know."

I stared at her. "I didn't know that."

She nodded. "I can pass through. I know I can bring you with me."

"My life is in your hands." Then I narrowed my eyes, looking at her more closely. "But what aren't you saying?"

"I had a dream a few nights ago," she said simply. "Orcades was in it."

Everyone was suddenly very quiet.

"We talked about many things. At first, I felt that it was just another dream." She hesitated. "But then, before it ended, before I woke up, Orcades told me she hoped I would have fun meeting my cousins." She gave a soft laugh. "She warned me they were little hellions."

I stared at her. "Do you think it was real?"

"I don't know," she said quietly. "It felt real to me."

I crossed the room and pulled her into my arms. She wrapped her arms around my back as I kissed her hair. Finally, she leaned back. "I know it'll be all right … when we go." She looked over at Florence. "But I don't think Blake and I should leave just yet."

Florence blinked. "What?"

"I want to stay until the baby is born," Pendragon said decisively.

Florence's face split into a happy smile. "Oh, Medra. Thank you." And then Florence was hugging us both, her arms wrapped around us tightly, her belly pressing up against my side.

I looked over at Nyxaris. He had his arms crossed over his chest and was grinning at my plight. I grinned back. "Guess we're staying for a while."

“I had a suite prepared, in case of this eventuality,” he said lightly. “You’ll both stay as long as you like.”

We stood there a few moments longer. Then finally, Florence took Pendragon’s arm. Nyxaris held the door for us, and the four of us left together.

Behind us, the archways waited.

* * * * *

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to Lynn Raposo, my editor at HarperCollins/MIRA Books. If you, Dear Reader, are currently holding a deluxe edition with pretty sprayed edges in your hands, you have Lynn to thank in no small part for that. During our very first Zoom call, she mentioned her love of Star Wars and Disney World—two of my favorite things. Making the decision to take a series from indie published to "trad" can be an overwhelming and intimidating decision, but Lynn put me at ease and convinced me that she and MIRA Books would be true champions for Blake, Medra, and the Bloodwing world. Over the course of four books, she has been a pleasure to work with, always giving feedback that only serves to make the story stronger.

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Readers may notice the presence of Professor Elizabeth Briggs in this book. She is named in honor of the author Elizabeth Briggs, who passed away from stage IV colon cancer in 2025. Elizabeth was a *New York Times* bestselling author of paranormal and fantasy romance, and she also devoted time to working with teens in foster care and with animal rescue organizations. Before her passing, she asked fellow authors to consider naming a character after her in her honor. Those of you who were familiar with the Bewitched Blooms anthology will understand why Elizabeth's passing from colon cancer particularly resonated with me.

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